

SUNDAY'S ZAMAN

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'Journalism should provide voice to the voiceless'



In this July 12, 2013 file photo, hundreds of journalists stage a rally to protest mistreatment and police crackdown on some reporters during Gezi protests in June. (Photo: DHA)

April 20, 2014, Sunday/ 00:51:58/ SEVGİ AKARÇEŞME/ ISTANBUL



One of the world's leading journalism schools, the Florida-based Poynter Institute, which has a reputation for providing high-quality online training in journalism, is offering its first Turkish-language program for journalists. With the project, supported by the US Consulate in Istanbul, interested journalists will have the opportunity to attend courses online and up to 20 of them will have the chance to receive scholarships for on-site training in Florida.

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Poynter Institute Director of Business Development Howard Finberg was in Istanbul to introduce the program, called NewsU Türkiye. A journalist with more than 30 years of experience, Finberg talked to Sunday's Zaman about his understanding of journalism as well as the challenges that the profession faces as technology evolves.

According to Finberg, journalism means "providing voice to the voiceless" and is a way of helping people understand what is going on around them. "Journalists are responsible for protecting the interest of the audience, citizens," Finberg said when asked whether the journalists have a duty to protect state interests.

Last week, two prominent newspapers, the Washington Post and the Guardian, received the Pulitzer Prize, the most prestigious award in journalism, for public service for their reporting on whistleblower Edward Snowden's leaks on the US' secret surveillance programs.

Regarding the role of whistleblowers in journalism, Finberg says that they have always been an "element of journalism." However, according to him, what really matters is putting the information provided by the whistleblower in context. The two institutions were awarded the Pulitzer Prize because "they were able to explain it as opposed to just saying here is a bunch of information," Finberg said. Helping the audience understand what information means is "one of the things that journalism does better than anything," he said, adding that in today's world this is "essential more than ever."

Finberg, who has worked in different positions at media outlets like the Chicago Tribune, The New York Times, The Arizona Republic and the San Francisco Chronicle, said governments should not interfere in the media. However, according to him, there is always "tension" between the government and the press "in terms of [the] press wants more and the government wants to share less." Finberg said that this is the "inherent conflict" between the free press and the state.

"Journalism is a vague, wide field now; many people [are] practicing it at many different levels"



Deadly gun attack in eastern Ukraine shakes fragile truce

Failure of the Geneva agreement could bring more bloodshed in eastern Ukraine, but may also prompt the United States early this week to impose tougher sanctions on the Kremlin -- with far-reaching potential consequences for many economies and for importers of Russian energy. At least two people were killed in a gunfight early on Sunday near a Ukrainian city controlled by pro-Russian separatists, shaking an already fragile international accord that w

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Pardon me, did the regime change?

Finberg said when asked to define journalism.

Finberg said he hopes that journalism is not used as a cover for other activities because that is "unfair" to real journalists who try to bring information to the public. "I know that happens sometimes, but that's a disservice to real journalism," he said.

One way of preventing the abuse of journalism is to strive for fair, accurate and balanced reporting for the readers, Finberg said. Trust, which is essential to the relationship between media outlet and audience, depends on the "transparency" of the media institution, he added.

When asked about the controversial National Intelligence Organization (MİT) bill currently being debated in the Turkish Parliament -- which threatens journalists, media owners and editors with imprisonment if they publish confidential MİT information -- Finberg said that "without having read and seen the bill, it does not sound like it is going to help journalism," adding that it sounds frightening and will not foster free and open discussion in society.

When Sunday's Zaman asked Finberg which documents should remain secret, he said, "I think journalists have to make sure that what they do just [does] not endanger lives." Journalists should weigh the risks while making sure that they inform the public, he said.

According to Finberg, one of the "concerning things" in Turkey is the polarization in media outlets. Finberg, who is aware that journalists can be fired for their views in Turkey, said that anytime journalism is under threat it resonates globally and in the US.

The biggest challenge of journalism

According to the seasoned journalist, among the many real challenges journalists face, the biggest has nothing to do with journalism itself. "It has to do with the economic model that supports journalism," he said. "How will we have journalism if we do not have media outlets that support journalists? That's the biggest challenge," he added.

Since a great deal of media are dependent on advertisements or subscriptions, "with advertisers finding ways to reach consumers directly without having to use media outlets, the revenue decreases as the number of journalists employed are limited," Finberg noted.

According to Finberg, smaller media outlets in particular will survive by providing "essential, relevant material to their audience, which means they really need to examine what the audience wants." What the audience wants, however, remains a big question. "That's what journalists and media owners need to understand and [it] will be different in every local community and every publication," Finberg said.

When asked whether, as an experienced journalist, he was intimidated by the changes in journalism, he said: "I was not intimidated by online journalism because I was helping to develop it. That was one way to get beyond the intimidation." He says that he has contributed to the building of newspapers' online portals, especially at The Arizona Republic. He acknowledges the challenge of technology because it is easy for people to "get caught up in ... being first." However, he underlines the importance of accuracy in reporting and putting the material into context.

Although with technology, all citizens are able to do "acts of journalism," Finberg said that what distinguishes professional journalists is that they understand the ethics and responsibilities of their profession.

Keywords: journalism , istanbul , US Consulate



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
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
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