School of Journalism Connects to Beijing with Live Videoconference

In mid-February, Indiana University School of Journalism professor Steve Raymer initiated the school’s first-ever live, international videoconference with a group of Chinese journalists in Beijing. The occasion was part of his International Newsgathering Systems class, in which 20 students from journalism and the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures participated in a 90-minute videoconference with 15 Chinese journalists. The experimental event was co-organized with the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, whose facilities were used to host the videoconference.

The video exchange came about as a result of a trip Raymer made to Beijing in November to learn more about the Chinese news media. In exchange for obtaining access to media organizations—never an easy matter in China for nonofficial visitors—he agreed to do a number of lectures at news organizations and universities, arranged by the press section of the U.S. Embassy. The idea of doing a live exchange occurred to him only when he was back at IUB and heard about the relative ease of using videoconferencing to bring in international speakers, using the facilities of Radio and Television Services. He then discussed it with Camille Purvis, deputy press secretary at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, who readily agreed to host the event at the embassy’s American Center and to help recruit Chinese participants with excellent English skills.

The general topic was on the journalistic practices in each country, a topic participants apparently could have discussed for longer than the 90-minute connection. Raymer was impressed with how openly the Chinese journalists spoke on the shortcomings of their own news media.

“We were all surprised how outspoken the Chinese were about the lack of a free press, their disdain of the communist party, and the propaganda function of both print and broadcast media in China,” Raymer said.

The journalists, in turn, asked the students frank questions about such topics as the U.S. reporting of the war in Iraq and what difficulties were resulting from the Patriot Act. They also admitted that the Internet was the major source of reliable news for urban Chinese, in spite of costly attempts by China’s Ministry of State Security to try blocking domestic and international Web sites.

The Chinese journalists were drawn from seven Asian media companies. Because the event took place on U.S. Embassy grounds, it meant that the videoconference was protected from the normal scrutiny and restrictions that the Chinese government can impose on its journalists. This freedom enabled both sides to be “honest and candid,” as confirmed by Ye Zhang, a graduate student from China studying journalism and public affairs at IU. Purvis, who moderated the discussion from the Beijing side, felt that the event gave the Chinese an invaluable chance to “see real faces representing real people who are studying the same kinds of issues they deal with every day.”

For the American students, the videoconference was a real highlight of the course and a rare chance for them to interact firsthand with foreign professionals in their own field who were otherwise so different in terms of language, culture, and system of government. The event was so notable that when Indiana Daily Student reporter Stephanie Frasco wrote a story about it two days after the event, the Voice of America news service picked it up as a feature story.

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