Butting Heads in Bratislava:

TALKING ETHICS IN THE FORMER SOVIET BLOC

BY PETER CLOWNEY

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It didn't help that two days before this trip to Slovakia, I'd paid $15 for the worst haircut of my life.

I'd stumbled out of the vaguely punk Chop Shop on South Street in Philadelphia accidentally wearing the same flattop I'd soon see adorning the head of every sub-40-year-old man in the Vienna airport. You might think the haircut could gently unify—*hey, you look just like me!*—but all it really did was set my puffy American face in neat relief. Wearing the same fuzzy blond coif, these guys looked at home and I resembled a slapped ass.

But faces aren't supposed to matter in radio. So I arrived as scheduled and sat before 18 broadcast journalism students around a long table in Bratislava, Slovakia. I found a stool, crossed my arms and held my chin as we listened to a recording of my voice burble out of a boom box.

I hoped the stories I'd brought would show my passion for radio and for reporting. I wanted the students to feel the pull of this craft. I hoped the class would hear directness and balance in the news features, and admire the slicing-up of political boasts and picking-out of the meat. They'd hear the same journalistic rules they'd been studying for six months applied to the peculiarly intimate medium of radio. If I was lucky, some of them would be dumbfounded; I'd even recorded the voice of a marionettist describing how he once attached electrodes to big, dead spiders and made their bodies twitch around in art class.

They loved the music feature, and they sang along with Sade a bit. But I also watched this class of adults dissolve in giggles every time one Hispanic activist spoke during the drug bust story—and then wait through the other speakers to relish her exotic accent again. The first Romanian student whose name I learned, Anca Dragu, asked me why I had to make the pieces so long, and why I sounded like I was going to cry as I spoke my parts. Didn't I think the audience would have understood where my sympathies lay, she asked, even if I hadn't led them there with my voice?

It was at about that moment that I began a two-week-long habit of scratching the newly bristling hairs on the back of my neck, feeling the skin grow warm under my fingers.

Perhaps I'd heard a little too much about Americans and Western Europeans running journalism clinics in this area of the world. Since Romanian tyrant Nicolae Ceausescu's fall on Christmas Day in 1989, and especially since the withering of the U.S.S.R. in 1991, Western trainers have been pouring in. Along with local activists, these trainers have established NGOs (non-governmental organizations—foundations, associations and the like), started newspapers, and have been doing everything they can to stimulate a strong independent press in Eastern Europe. It's understood that a free press is the *sine qua non* of a tenable democracy. The story for the past ten years has been that of the United States, Britain and other First World nations fulfilling an ethical duty, teaching former Communist nations how to establish an elegant and open Fourth Estate.

I'd formed images in my head of Americans hauling in our gifts of journalistic codes and even ethical conundrums, and then watching these products spill out across the landscape of the former Soviet Union. It's typical

of Americans that we expect our efforts overseas to multiply so easily.

Of course, the work hasn't proceeded that way. Groups such as the Center for Independent Journalism and George Soros's Open Society Institute haven't sent out evangelical waves. They've dug roots in major cities, and they have largely stayed put. They understand that lasting reform takes a generation and is driven by a nation's own people.

And so, standing in front of that Bratislavan seminar, challenged within the first few minutes by a bright 24-year-old Romanian with dyed red hair, I began to understand how different this would be from imparting journalistic notions to American students. I wouldn't be able to reel off a list of dos and don'ts, taboos and guidelines. These students wouldn't sit for it.

I faced six Romanians, four Georgians, four Slovaks, one person apiece from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, the Ukraine and Kazakhstan. They were college grads hungry for reporting careers in their own countries. They knew we teachers expected them to help lead their nations' media toward greater independence and accountability. They needed answers they could use. That meant, in part, taking what I knew about journalism—the values, biases and filters that we American journalists accept as the norm—and culling what was truly valuable and ironclad from what are simply old habits and conveniences that we Americans value.

I'd never been asked to do this before.

Most journalists can deliver the trademark rant about what's wrong with their business. A few evenings after that first day at the Bratislavan seminar, I delivered mine to Laura Kelly, the American reporter who arranged the ten-month program of which I was a small part. We sat on the terraced roof of her apartment, with its full-horizon view of the city's crumbling, Communist-era housing blocks, jumbled spires, patches of neon, and modernistic bridge spanning the Danube—all dwarfed by Bratislava's enormous castle and the mountain behind it.

I told Laura that my main problem with American reporting is its tone of self-congratulation. We've established a rhetoric of "excellence." Every local television station boasts an "award-winning news team." Journalistic self-criticism and adulation runs rampant in magazines such as *Brill's Content, American Journalism Review* and *Columbia Journalism Review* and on Jim Romenesko's *MediaNews* website.

With all that energetic talk devoted to ethics and professionalization, why aren't we better than we are? *Time, Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report* remain committed to their decision of years ago to dumb down their magazines, leaving hard news mostly to the similarly downsized and dumbed-down newspapers and webpages. The new media cycle birthed by cable, the web and by the networks' "special coverage" of tragic events creates a stultifying, gossipy string of details around any important issue.

And most galling to me, we take cover under a malleable ethical code. When networks announce Election Night returns before a state's polls have closed, it's not because "the other guy's doing it." It's because the public has "the right to know."

Laura was a patient listener, and she wasn't inclined to act as apologist for the American way of reporting. But she reminded me how little these problems I'd been describing compromise the need for us over here.

In Romania, home to one third of our journalism class, Marius Dragomir was charged falsely, tried and convicted of slander, Laura told me. As he finished the program, it was unclear whether he would be thrown in jail, and yet he planned to return to his newspaper in Bucharest. Any businessman or public figure in Romania has the right to sue a journalist for libel as a penal offense, saddling many journalists with heavy fines and sometimes a prison sentence. In Kazakhstan, the class's poet and novelist Didar Almaty publishes news articles under a government that the Committee to Protect Journalists selected as one of the world's ten most dangerous. And several months after my rooftop conversation with Laura, audio tapes would surface in the

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Ukraine—where Olena Mikhailovska writes about contemporary art—in which that nation's president seemed to call for the disappearance of Internet journalist George Gongadze, whose body was found beheaded and decomposing outside Kiev.

Even after political reforms and Freedom of Information acts become law, Laura explained, many of these journalists will remain handicapped by the environment in which they grew up. Most of their lives, they've read articles dominated by a single, often unnamed, government source. News stories have often begun with philosophical musings telling the reader how to feel about the items to follow. Crazy assertions have gone unchallenged. Arbitrary statistics that purport to measure bureaucratic efficiency have stood in for content. Laura sees her students replicate these behaviors now, even though they don't have to or want to.

Laura will send enthusiastic young reporters to news conferences in Bratislava to ask officials questions. "The response might be spin, ducking, or that glossy sort of bullshit that takes up a lot of airspace but says zip. The student will listen, nod, jot down notes vigorously and then ask nothing more." Afterward, Laura asks the student why he didn't push for specifics or make the official answer the question. "The student is dumbfounded; he thinks he has done his job," she says. And it's not just inexperienced journalists who respond this way. "I see the professional Slovak journalists just swallow what they're fed. . . . There is no culture of indignation."

It came down to this, I felt. American journalism may wax arrogant and hypocritical at times. It may get wrapped up in a star system of news celebrity and technologically seductive hype. But amid all that distraction, a basic set of ethical rules remains at least on the lips of the journalists and the public. Stories answer the questions that they raise. The most important information comes first. Facts and judgments are attributed clearly and put in a balanced context. Journalists work for the public's trust and not for the authorities'. If these students applied these rules, I felt, they would resolve the abuses mentioned above. The rules are right, whether or not Americans heed them.

The key in any country is to nurture an environment in which both the public and the reporters are outraged when these rules are broken.

About a week before our conversation, Laura had thrown a party on her apartment roof for all the students, the three other American instructors and the one Slovak teacher. Laura has been teaching overseas since the mid-'90s in Mongolia, Turkey, Slovenia, Albania and in some of the home countries of our present crop of students. She's come to see some shared qualities in these students that set them apart from the students she had taught at the University of Florida. As she wrote to me later:

"They are more deeply educated, more widely read, more savvy about world politics, and more widely traveled (most have left their countries). They speak at least two languages. They're fluent in more than one culture, growing up in their own and yet consuming the exports of others (the U.S. and Western Europe especially). They're more world-weary, suspicious of optimism, unsure about the forces and tidal flow of change, disgusted by the indiscriminate import of Western culture into the social vacuum created by the sudden changes 11 years ago."

That night at the party, one of the students began singing a national folk song. The others immediately stopped talking and came over. When he finished singing, someone else stepped up. One student after another sang drinking songs, lullabies, pop songs. Some were in Russian, a language about half the students share, and the rest were in each of their home languages. Dimiter Lazhov, a lanky blond television anchor from Bulgaria, brought out his accordion and played, backing himself up with his strong baritone. For the first time, the entire group spent perhaps an hour together speaking no English at all.

Laura said later she kept expecting the music to stop, but the students kept thinking of something else they wanted to sing, some other part of their culture they wanted to assert and make heard.

With only two weeks in which to teach, I split the schedule in half. The first week, I sent the students out with MiniDisc recorders, microphones and headsets, asking them to gather arts news of all kinds and to wrestle their way into familiarity with the equipment. The second week, I moved on to highly produced, three- to five-minute arts features. This meant a rush schedule, and yet I knew they'd survived similarly demanding tasks before. I'd watched their television exposé of Bratislava's homeless problem and their profile of a local painter who felt Slovaks disdained her Jewishness. I'd read their enterprise stories about tainted rural well water turning babies blue, and about a city park that was dying because of political red tape.

Their radio work turned out to be just as promising. I soon was listening to recordings of tattoo artists, bootleg-CD salesmen, a saloon pianist working his crowd and an underpaid prima ballerina whispering that she might skip town. In a city where only about half of the students spoke even a cognate language, they pulled remarkable stories off the street. Some of these reporters in their mid-twenties had already been working professionally for nearly a decade. The evolving media culture needed every smart, motivated person it could get.

Anca Dragu was a superb example of this. Anca already had an eight-year media career behind her, having convinced a newly formed local television station to hire her part-time at age 16. She was the first news reporter the station ever had. Around that time, Anca unearthed a Western news guidebook, simply entitled "Television Reporting." She studied the book like a Bible, learning which colors looked good or bad behind news anchors as eagerly as she devoured the "who, what, when, where, why and how" that every news story should answer. Anca said it was the first time she understood the huge gap between standards in the West and the ones in Romania.

Like many of the students, Anca skittered between various types of media. She worked her way through TV, radio, magazine and newspaper writing. She won an award for reporting on Central European affairs, but she said that even her editors rarely wanted to talk about standards, ethics or quality.

Finally, Anca found a boss who had reported for the BBC. That boss helped arrange BBC television and radio training for Anca, which she soaked up eagerly. She learned how to structure stories, rely on the facts and use sound to stimulate the imagination. Now, she's determined to become a full-time reporter for the BBC. I realized that Anca compared everything she knew about media at home with what she'd learned from the BBC—and with what American media had to offer.

"Americans are a little pathetic," Anca told me, referring to American news reporting. She watched a "60 Minutes" feature, she said, in which the reporter visited a mass grave in Srebrenica. "He walked among corpses in a cave and almost cried. He said, 'In Bosnia, even the dead people don't have a home.' C'mon, this is manipulation!"

She's convinced that American journalists think that they have to explain everything to the audience, including what to feel. That's what she considers pathetic—relying on melodrama and condescending writing. "If you show me some corpses, and you are crying next to them . . . I feel a little bit humiliated. I'm not stupid. I know what it means."

Anca also aimed this criticism at the way I voiced my radio stories. I told her that we in American public radio actually try very hard to excise any maudlin cues from our work. I asked Anca if perhaps we had the same goals as her BBC teachers, but with a different sense of what sounds natural? Anca smiled and quoted back to me some content of other American news coverage that fit squarely in the category of melodrama.

While criticizing the pushy, heartstring-plucking attributes of American style, Anca believed passionately in the basic standards of balance and completeness that Western European and American journalism share. She

just wasn't sure we teachers knew how impossible it was to meet those standards back home.

"We had an ethics class here [in Bratislava], and all the students laughed," Anca said. "Everything is so different here—it would take ten or 15 years to change. It's a long talk, but it starts with economics."

For example, Anca said she'd worked for newspaper publishers trying to cope with a shrunken advertising market. "There are three options. One is to become a slave to a politician or to a party [to get state funds]. Another is to allow under-the-table, hidden payment for publicity [in articles], which is most widespread. And a third is for a newspaper boss to use the business to launder money. People know this. They read the newspaper just to know about the latest murders and bankruptcies."

Listening to her teachers describe the way reporting should work, Anca sometimes imagined herself like Pip in Dickens' "Great Expectations"—waiting for a kindly benefactor to pluck her out of the ashes. If some angel like George Soros gave her money to start a newspaper or radio station, she thought she might do some real good. Otherwise, she wondered whether she could make a difference.

Many of the students wished for a bridge between the goals we discussed and the reality of journalism in their countries. Marius Dragomir, the Romanian journalist convicted of libel, edited the arts page of his newspaper in Bucharest, where reporters were so poorly paid that some took bribes to cover stories. His paper once brought over American trainers specifically to help lay out the paper so that it would look more professional. When they left, Marius said, the paper looked great but it contained all the same bad articles.

Marius called journalists who are now in their twenties "a generation of sacrifice," because they have to practice good reporting without the training and background they need, and must overcome prohibitive laws, prevailing norms and blossoming tabloids like *Atac la Persoana* ("Attack the Person"). In a paper he wrote for graduate school, Marius entitled one sec-

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tion, “The National Sport Among Romanian Businessmen and Officials: Suing Journalists.”

What he wanted was a nationwide, university-level journalism training initiative, based on Western standards and aimed directly at the problems of Romania. Marius pinned many hopes on established journalism faculties in Bucharest, Timisoara and Sibiu. He felt tremendously grateful for his studies in Bratislava.

But he had expected American trainers to know the difference between their country and his.

Other Americans who have taught in former Soviet nations and in Central and Eastern Europe say they have tried to adapt their message to the students' practical experience. In doing so, they've discovered that the most hallowed maxims of American journalism get pruned away because their effectiveness becomes suspect. The biggest of these is objectivity.

Rob Snyder heads the journalism department at the Newark campus of Rutgers University in New Jersey. As a guest lecturer at E.L.T.E. University in Hungary, he learned that although the students had very little fear of censorship, they mistrusted their highly politicized judiciary system. The students said they needed the freedom to speak out against abuses in the courts, and Snyder couldn't really argue with them. Instead of asking them to be “objective,” he laid out the guidelines for taking a well-reported stand. Snyder concentrated on explaining the difference between “copping an attitude” and writing an independent, analytical report that considers contrary evidence as well.

Even in Western European countries, journalists often take clear political stands. “Britain, France, Italy, Norway, Sweden—these are all democracies that seem to function as well as any,” Snyder says. “But their reporting is much more interpretive [than ours] and much less likely to claim objectivity. We have to be careful [to discern] where our standards can help other people and where they come with a tone of arrogance.”

Julia Barton, a reporter for WHYY, the National Public Radio affiliate in Philadelphia, went with Philadelphia *Daily News* editor Ellen Foley to run a series of day-long USAID workshops in Ukraine. Barton says they encountered many journalistic habits that would get a reporter fired in the United States.

One program director suggested inventing a story to launch a series about a very real problem: wild dogs overrunning the town. Barton was impressed with the way Foley handled the suggestion. “She didn't say, ‘How dare you! We don't make up stories!’ She just said, ‘Actually, it would be more effective if it were real. Then people would really know this happened to one of their neighbors.’ ”

When radio reporters in Ukraine put shows together, they tended to book only one government official, assuming that that person knew all sides. Barton says one of the trainers lectured the Ukranians about how stupid this was. Barton could see the resentment growing in the class. So she explained how much more exciting a program with multiple voices from various perspectives could be. They responded much more positively to this idea.

The trick, Foley says, is to give reporters the techniques to tackle issues fairly, and in ways that get local communities fired up. Her model would be to encourage reporting crusades, like the ones the *Daily News* ran that pressured the mayor of Philadelphia into hauling away 40,000 cars abandoned on city streets. “That's the only way good reporting can survive over there—with extremely local support. No one's going to pay for something that doesn't matter to them.”

Miklós Haraszti, a Hungarian author and media critic, agrees with Foley's partisan-press analogy. The Eastern European democracies have not yet been tested by time, he says, and many are still “illiberal.” This means journalists in former Eastern bloc countries must squeeze the irrational out of the public discourse and “be on guard against abuse or totalitarian demagoguery.” This is a process of nation-building, he says, and journalists are on the front lines.

Haraszti believes that to preach objectivity in Hungary or similar states would be to pretend that the public discourse has developed more than it has. "It's not like America, where journalists can afford to be pluralistic, to be cool with their subjects and to convey all the facts, and then to leave the decision to the people, unafraid." Instead, Haraszti sees a much sharper, more outspoken role for the Eastern European press, one that many mainstream American journalists have not grown up with.

Arguing with my class about the American rule on objectivity—"never insert your opinion into a news story"—I got some agreement, but also some calls to look at some Western European papers for a different model. It seemed the right balance to strike, actually. On one side, I heard that the stakes were too high for reporters to be robbed of the chance to speak their minds. On the other side, I heard an allegiance to an unassailable standard of fairness.

Rob Snyder calls this standard "American reporting's pleasant fiction." He explains, "We American journalists continue to maintain that we're strictly objective observers, neutral and making no judgments that color our work in one way or another. But we know that's not true. The benefit we get from that fiction, of working against any accusation of bias, is the reporting gets done better. It can stand the scrutiny and assails of higher-ups and critics."

Bill Siemering, National Public Radio's first program director, likes to say that the public has to trust your work as much as it trusts the water from the tap. In Bratislava, we were working toward that by questioning one of the fiercest assumptions of American newsrooms, and it seemed more liberating than any guideline I could have offered.

My last days in Bratislava were spent hunched over a computer screen, playing back digitized sound snippets while helping the students mix their longer arts features. They had to read their vocal tracks into a tiny microphone clipped onto the desk by the window, so every story came with its own ambient backdrop of rumbling buses and manically clicking crosswalk signals. But each story also featured a person finding his or her voice, moving from a whisper to something more authoritative.

Around this time, it dawned on me how lucky I was to work with these students on arts journalism, rather than a more general subject. In their countries, many of them could write about culture more freely than anything else. The arts acted as a shelter and an incubator.

Marius Dragomir told me he chose to work on his Romanian newspaper's arts and culture page specifically because it slid under the radar of lawsuit-happy businessmen and politicians. Marius didn't feel he was hiding from important stories—indeed, he could often address the issues of the day more deeply by writing about the work of Romanian artists. Less fear of censorship meant more chance to develop a public name for himself, which in turn might lead to more protection on news stories.

To pursue cultural reporting in this region means pricking at nationalist insecurities. Nations like the Ukraine are still struggling, Julia Barton says, to shake off 70 years of mindless praising of the artists who've been praised a thousand times before. A Ukranian journalist was beaten up by thugs just for writing a book criticizing the national bard, Taras Shevchenko, a contemporary of Pushkin's. Olena Mikhailovska, the Ukrainian visual-arts writer, finds editors tacitly encouraging this kind of ignorance, if only by perenially choosing to cover folk art instead of contemporary art.

The spring before our Bratislavan seminar, Didar Almaty of Kazakhstan had published his first book, a compendium of novels and philosophical essays. Didar said his creative writing and his journalism were separate enterprises, but driven by the same need—to document "the current life of my country." As a print journalist and television anchor, his most urgent task was to report the stories of a generation of people trapped between two eras—the Communist era in the past, and the capitalist era in the not-quite-graspable future.

Didar found inspiration in two American writers—Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald—whose names may sound almost anachronistic to

someone in the States. In his country, he identified strains of Fitzgerald's Lost Generation, of Hemingway's search for connection. As Didar argued it, the modern-day films and music and novels and visual art in Kazakhstan tell a story, unique in the country's history, of the radical transition for many people from poor to middle class, rural to urban, illiterate to technoliterate. Didar saw the documentation of his country's cultural life as a moral, aesthetic and political good. And under a regime that orders court seizures of newspapers it disagrees with, and that controls almost all broadcast news, Didar's strategy did seem the best hope for avoiding censorship.

The arts offered Didar in microcosm what we trainers had come to encourage in macro. These journalists needed a clearly defined space in which to explore their jobs. In our workshops, they had the satisfactions of infrastructure. We supported them the way a free and protected media culture would, were such a culture to exist in Kazakhstan or Romania. They were able to stretch out here and acquire the tools that might let them force a little more room for themselves when they returned home.

As I left, I thought that anything that gives these reporters space to do their jobs, anything that allows them real choices is a victory. I don't really care whether or not Marius's newspaper would be labeled "objective" by American standards. It matters only that the editor he works for knows the difference.

Eventually, adequate funding, a fair libel code, community trust and accountability should become part of the journalism equation in the former Soviet Bloc. It will be a disappointment if those supports simply breed higher-end, ill-conceived knockoffs of "Action News" or "Good Morning America." But I get the feeling that Anca, Didar and Marius would not let an all-gloss, no-substance approach progress very far in any project in which they had a vote.

What I really wanted to do was bring the class back with me to the States. I wanted to watch them work in my environment. Let them haul a tape recorder and video camera with me to a mural site in North Philadelphia, or dig in overnight at Lowe's Hotel to await a 5:00 a.m. face-off between the mayor and striking Teamsters. I wanted to understand more completely what inspired these reporters, what practices they considered ridiculous and what work they aspired to recreate back home. I wanted to deepen the furrow they had incited between me and the preening American media.

In fact, some of the students will be in the States soon. Two of the students may study journalism at the University of Illinois, and another at Columbia University.

But still, I get anxious. How many sermons will they hear about the American way of journalism? And how often might they be allowed to interrupt the speaker halfway through?