

Found in Translation

By Grace Capuzzo

Comparing my three-month internship in Italy with the last three years I've spent at Salisbury taking a variety of classes, I found some of what I learned in college to be most valuable, some that did not prepare me at all for what I discovered in Italy, and some that gave me the tools to adapt to a different style of communications one might inevitably find in a foreign country.

While working at The Florence Newspaper, ⁽¹⁾ the differences I encountered that had the greatest impact on me were what I found to be a loose regard for journalistic ethics, a disrespect for the value of public relations practices, and the general recognition that Italy is a closed society and only by speaking up can one effect change. Being unfamiliar with these alien attitudes, I could have sunk in despair and thrown in the towel. Instead I chose to seize upon those communications skills I've learned in my years at Salisbury, seize control, and put my own imprint on my experience. Despite my misgivings about some of the ways of Italian culture, making this discovery about myself allowed for one of the most rewarding experiences academically, culturally and socially in my life thus far.

Zero Ethics

A journalistic code of ethics doesn't seem to apply to journalism practices in Italy. Similar to the society, journalism in Italy is largely controlled and funded by the government. Censorship is alive and well, while plagiarism runs rampant.

(1) Schrader

Until Silvio Berlusconi, the former prime minister of Italy, was forced to resign a few weeks ago, he owned three of Italy's major television news stations and influenced much of the subject matter published in magazines and newspapers throughout the country. He made sure every political message reflected positively on him and his team. Journalism's role in society is supposed to be the "voice of the people," One of the primary tenets of journalism is to strive for objectivity. While some U.S. news outlets clearly favor one political viewpoint, in Italy the majority of journalists expressed only one side: the Right. Berlusconi's merging of government and the media, is one reason he remained in office for two decades even after countless personal scandals.

It's a small step from a government controlling the message to outright censorship of news deemed unfavorable or potentially damning. In my interview with Mario Spezi, the criminal journalist and author of *The Monster of Florence*, ⁽²⁾ he discussed the consequences of censorship. Giuliano Mignini was one of the lead prosecutors in the serial murder case who believed a satanic cult instead of a lone killer was responsible for the murders. According to Spezi, Mignini kept a running list of journalists who opposed his views. While the evidence proved otherwise, Mignini accused any journalist who went against his theory as complicit in the murders, even putting Spezi in jail.

Even though Mignini was clearly corrupt, and Spezi wasn't shy in expressing his views on him -- even referring to him as "the Monster of Perugia" -- the author ended many sentences with, 'off the record' during our interview. When I questioned Spezi about this, he seemed almost fearful, saying, "I could get sued or worse, put in jail."

Spezi told me that back in the 1970s, when he was the lead criminal reporter for

(2) Spezi

La Nazione, a newspaper headquartered in Florence and read throughout Italy, journalism was a dog eat dog world. He said the job of news reporters was to fairly inform the public, often turning into a sport between journalists trying to beat the competition. A large element of getting material was knowing who to be friends with, whether that be police or even the coroner.

When I asked Spezi how Italian journalism has changed, he shook his head saying, "Now everyone controls the order." There are press conferences to control all of the information, which of course is the same, regardless of what source you get it from. "Newspapers now have the news the government wants." While The Florence Newspaper wasn't as politically charged as some, many stories had to be edited, as to not offend, "the system."

Another ethical breach I witnessed was that several newspapers throughout Italy repeated entire stories already published elsewhere, even using many of the same quotes. Italian media seem to have few qualms about plagiarism. Even at my own newspaper, the editors steered me toward stories that had already been thoroughly covered by other media outlet rather allowing me to pursue original ideas.

This knowledge should prove beneficial through my future endeavors in the field of journalism. Already, I have come to recognize news that is biased and have becoming increasingly cognizant at those who do and don't adhere to ethical standards. Especially since American journalism is constantly facing ethical dilemmas. It will also help me be more aware of citing sources correctly.

Nothing but Ethics

Contrary to what I saw in Italy, the code of ethics is a vital part of journalism practices in the United States. Dr. Agarwal's Communication Research Class (2011) ⁽³⁾ stressed the importance of adhering to ethical standards in journalism and communication practices. In determining best practices, American journalists turn to the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics ⁽⁴⁾ to set the standard. This document establishes rules on everything from the need to be truthful and objective to one's responsibility to readers and society.

In class we learned that it is the journalists job to "tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so," and to support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant," as stated in the code. This open and balanced approach ensures a more truthful outcome, allowing the public to form its own opinion, without controls wrought by government censorship.

Another part of the code suggests journalists avoid all conflicts of interest and if there is such a conflict, reveal it. Clearly Italian journalists would run into trouble here. In Dr. Simmons' Public Affairs Reporting class (2009) ⁽⁵⁾ we learned to never allow ourselves to be coerced by police and government officials. This includes not accepting any gifts, favors or job offers. While in Italy government can influence an entire story, this is considered unacceptable in the U.S and could be grounds for firing.

In Dr. Simmons' class we learned the importance of an ombudsman, a person who is hired by the newspaper, "to clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct," as stated in the Code of Ethics. This is crucial

⁽³⁾ Dr. Agarwal ⁽⁴⁾ SJP's Code of Ethics ⁽⁵⁾ Dr. Simmons

to “give voice to the voiceless; official sources of information can be equally valid.” We also learned the dire consequences of plagiarism and fabrication and discussed the case of Jason Blair, a New York Times reporter who was a rising star before he was fired for borrowing or fully making up stories that appeared on the paper’s front pages.

Who needs PR?

In Italy, public relations is not regarded as a fully respectable career, nor seen by the Italian business community as bringing added value as it is in America. My first assignment at The Florence Newspaper was to try and get local businesses to buy ads in the paper. People would listen to me for a few minutes, but were essentially glad-handing me, with no intentions of ever purchasing advertisements. Even the paid Italian employees at the newspaper considered themselves lucky if they sold three ads in a matter of weeks, some averaging only one ad a month.

Furthermore, I gave the paper’s publisher, Lorenzo Picchi, suggestions on ways to expand the circulation of the paper, such as hosting a Halloween party that would target the student clientele that the paper was trying to reach. I sought out venues and even talked to business owners and clubs about trades in terms of services for free advertising. Since I was working with a small fund, I talked to the city’s haunted dungeons about helping decorate for the party. While Mr. Picchi was impressed with my work in Italy, he was unwilling to invest even minimally in the marketing events I proposed. Money is rarely spent unless there is an immediate and obvious return on investment. Such disinclination to invest in public relations is one of the main reasons Italy is in an economic crisis.

For my future path, this realization only furthered my belief in the importance of marketing, PR and advertising for any business to be successful. As a Communications major at Salisbury, largely focusing on Public Relations, I could never be prepared for Italy's complete disregard for the practice.

PR Makes the World Go Round

In the US if you're a good PR professional, you are respected and businesses recognize your value and are willing to include you at the table in decision-making. In fact many businesses realize that the focus paid to their company through these professionals' efforts, can either make or break them. In Professor Scovell's Crisis Communication class (2010) ⁽⁶⁾, we learned the importance of a premeditated plan for companies in case they receive bad publicity and their reputation is on the line. This can be anything from a natural disaster, to inappropriate sexual behavior. While the media is typically responsible for the negative attention, PR agents are also called on to send out news releases and prepare statements to the public, to save a company's tarnished character.

Many times, good or bad PR, doesn't come from a PR agent, but instead people in your company. This further enforces the need for good relations between employees, so word to the public is only positive.

According to Bernstein Crisis Management,⁽⁷⁾ a national crisis consultancy group based in California, 'every employee is a PR representative and crisis manager for your organization whether you want them to be or not.'

⁽⁶⁾ Prof. Scovell

⁽⁷⁾ Bernstein

In Professor Davis's Writing for Media class (2009) ⁽⁸⁾, we learned how social media is a growing tool for Public Relations, through Facebook, Twitter and blogging websites. We learned that by researching a topic online, pr companies use the information to target our interests and constantly bombard us with advertisements sometimes without us even realizing it.

If your not satisfied with something, change it

While certain communications practices don't extend to Italy, standing up for yourself crosses all cultures. Before I signed up for Global Experiences, I told our program director that I was more interested in the field of public relations than journalism, based on the PR classes I had taken at Salisbury. She informed me that they had found me an internship at the Florence Newspaper where I would be doing just that. One of the stipulations of the program was if we didn't like the internship they assigned us we would have the opportunity to switch to a more suitable one.

Within the first week of my internship I was told that I would be going out to sell advertisements, promoting the paper on social networking sites and trying to bring more publicity and attention to a growing publication. On paper this sounded ideal in preparing me for my future, In reality it was a nightmare. Vince, my fellow intern, joined me in thinking up good marketing strategies and going out on the streets of Florence to put them into practice. Even with his fluent Italian and my skills in selling and promoting, we couldn't sell a single ad. Such intransigence within Italian society was shocking.

Other participants in this program initially had similar disenchantments with their

⁽⁸⁾ Prof. Davis

internships. Rather than working with the company they were assigned to, they quickly requested to change internships. While that benefited them, I came up with a solution that fit me better, by speaking up and molding my internship to something I really enjoyed. I told my boss that selling ads was a thankless job and I would be better suited to writing articles and even creating a full list of distribution sites, something the newspaper lacked.

At first my boss was hesitant, since my internship was strictly public relations, but he allowed me to write an article nonetheless. I chose a subject that would appeal to many students living abroad; saving money in the city. I researched thoroughly asking the opinions of students to make for a personalized story. My boss loved the article and allowed me to focus more on the editorial side of the paper. I suggested that I turn my Saving Money in the City idea into a column, which he gladly approved. My article on secret bakeries proved to be such a big hit, that he split it up into two separate issues. He recognized my talents and enthusiasm for the newspaper, so he gave me the assignment to interview Mario Spezi, an Italian celebrity author. He put my Monster of Florence article on the first three pages of the newspaper.

This kind of working through the details carried on throughout my entire experience in Italy. Trying to solve conflicts whenever you're unhappy might not always work, but it's better to try and fail than not try at all. And sometimes, even failing to make a change can turn out to be a success.

Before I went aboard, I was unhappy with what I was told would be my housing situation. The other Salisbury students had been placed together and I was supposedly going to be living with all strangers in an already foreign environment. I immediately

contacted Global Experiences, expressing my unhappiness. The program coordinator told me to give it a try and if I was dissatisfied they could move me.

I went over to Italy with a positive outlook, deciding to give it a fair chance. I lived with five other girls, hailing from China, Germany, Mexico, Holland and Israel. Like my internship, I worked with my living situation and ultimately found it be one of the most rewarding experiences. The daily discussions about our differing cultures and experiences and even our weekly family dinners, where one of the girls would prepare meals native to her country, opened my eyes to a whole new world of communication. I learned how differently people interact, but how we all share common values. This was the exception to the rule and both experiences will help me find success in communicating with others in my future career. Speaking up when your needs aren't met, but also knowing when to give something a fair shot and how to fix it to your standards, will be important skills for my future.

In Professor Ozoke's Negotiation and Conflict Management in Business class (2011) ⁽⁹⁾, I learned the importance of negotiation tactics and styles in any work environment. Through our weekly role playing activities, where one person would play the boss and another would play the worker, he taught us how to utilize strategies such as assertive communication to effectively get one's point across while respecting the needs of others.

I prepared for my meeting with my boss by using one of Ozoke's methods known as procedural concerns, where you lay out a problem and three specific points to justify your

⁽⁹⁾ Prof. Ozoke

complaint. Since my boss and I had already developed a good rapport, it became clear we would use the collaborative approach, where we both succeed in getting our needs met, one of the five most popular negotiation styles in the conflict model.

In the housing debate, the method of haggling was used, if I didn't like my living situation, Global Experiences must change it, but I would give it a fair chance first. In the end both parties reached common ground and I learned interesting life experiences from working with what I was offered.

In addition to not respecting PR people, nor adhering to an ethical code, on a more global level, I recognized that that Italy is a relatively closed society. At first I thought because I was American and my Italian wasn't very strong, that was what was hindering me. I soon realized it was simply because I wasn't a native Italian, not having been born and raised in Florence, where one's status and class is far more important than ones skills and know how. This was my experience overall in Italy, that time and time again I felt like an outsider for not having an Italian birth certificate.

Perhaps this outsider status, kept me from fully appreciating Italians' own code of ethics or what they consider valuable business practices. But it also taught me to speak up and be more assertive about what I wanted and how to go about getting it. Each of these three lessons was an eye opener to me about life in what would seem like a comparable country to the United States. Yet being a far older and more established society, Italy clearly plays by its own set of rules. Of course, a civilization that dates back more than two thousand years is going to adhere to a long and well established social order, with seemingly little room for change or modernization.

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