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CANADA'S WATCHDOG ON THE WATCHDOGS APRIL 24,2014

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I don't always play by hometown rules

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Lisa Coxon

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As I reach for the voice recorder on the desk, the professor asks, casually: "You'll send me my quotes, right?" I freeze. I'm sitting in an office on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, finishing up an interview my classmate and I are conducting for a story about legalizing weed. Trying to be polite, we tell the professor that showing quotes is not something we normally do—but that in this case we will.

It feels wrong to someone coming from a news culture that trains journalists never to hand material over before publishing it. After five months of study among members of 26 other nationalities at the Danish School of Media and Journalism (DSMJ) in Aarhus, Denmark, I've learned something unexpected. Unlike in Canada, sending sources their quotes is the norm here in the world's happiest country, so I couldn't help but wonder: when journalists report abroad, what principles do they have to compromise?

Over the course of the semester, my class travelled to Copenhagen as foreign correspondents, Brussels as European Union reporters and a destination of our choice for a final project. We put a magazine together in a weekend and acted as an international daily news desk for three days. I had to get used to working every day, albeit with shorter hours: 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. After all, reporters in foreign lands must learn to adapt their journalistic ethics and practices in order to get the story.

Sometimes it's small, painless adjustments that must be made; they can help you avoid having minor panic attacks, like the one I nearly had when I first glanced at the number "10,000" in my professor's instructions and assumed it meant words. (It actually referred to characters; it's not unusual for Danish news outlets to provide a character count instead of a word count, or sometimes both.)

Other times, the necessary adaptations are more morally challenging. Øjvind Kyrø, a Danish journalist who teaches risk reporting at DSMJ, has been a freelance war correspondent since 1992, travelling often to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a country he drily calls "one of the worst places on earth." Locals aren't familiar with how journalists work, and in their eyes he's a rich man, because he usually stays in a hotel with running water and electricity. When sources divulge their horror stories, they expect gifts or money in return. "It's very difficult," he says, admitting that he gives sources money, but only for transportation or food. "That's the way I do it. I don't feel bad about it."

Canadian foreign correspondents have had similar experiences. Martin Regg Cohn, the *Toronto Star*'s Queen's Park columnist, recalls his time as the paper's Middle East and Asia bureau chief, a position he held for 11 years. In 2000, while in Kabul, Afghanistan, with his wife, Cohn wrote about the challenges of educating young girls in makeshift schools forbidden by the Taliban. A burka-clad woman approached them and revealed that she was running a secret school. Cohn and his wife covered the story, but as they were leaving, they looked at each other: "Is that it? Are we just going to walk away?" Cohn pulled a U.S. $100 bill from his wallet and gave it to the woman for her expenses. "It was a bit of a departure to step out of that bystander role," he says. "But it was the right thing to do."

Back in Aarhus, my colleague and I leave our source's office and look at each other, bemused, as we walk down the hallway. Then we shrug. What can we do? We're not in Canada anymore.

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