

Should journalists obtain informed consent from their sources?

OTTAWA, March 3, 2014 /CNW/ – The Canadian Association of Journalists’ ethics advisory committee is asking whether self-identification is enough when it comes to interviewing and quoting those who don’t have any experience dealing with journalists.

Under Canadian law the only information a reporter must disclose to someone in order to obtain legal consent to conduct an interview and publish its contents is the reporter’s name and that of their employer. Does this standard offer enough protection to inexperienced and/or marginalized people whose public revelations may inadvertently harm them?

Informed consent would require journalists to reveal potentially harmful consequences of disclosing private information. Is this a radical notion that potentially undermines our ability to serve the public interest? Or is it time that journalists recognize that we need to take more care when dealing with vulnerable people? The latest discussion paper from the Canadian Association of Journalists’ ethics advisory committee debates this issue.

The result is the discussion paper “On the Record: Is it Really Consent Without Discussion of Consequences?” The paper has been posted to www.caj.ca and the ethics section of www.j-source.ca.

Panel chair Meredith Levine, of Western University’s graduate journalism program led the writing of the discussion paper, assisted by Toronto Star public editor Kathy English, CBC ombudsperson Esther Enkin and CBC Fifth Estate senior producer Julian Sher.

“The first duty of journalism is to serve the public interest. This can get complicated when our subjects and sources are inexperienced. Some times, publicly sharing their private information could lead to consequences of which they are unaware,” said CAJ president Hugo Rodrigues. “The CAJ and J-source hope this discussion paper engages journalists in a lively and important debate on this issue.”

Meredith Levine and Julian Sher will lead a workshop dealing with the questions raised in the discussion paper as part of the 2014 CAJ conference in Vancouver, May 9-10.

The CAJ is Canada’s largest national professional organization for journalists from all media, representing over 600 members across the country. The CAJ’s primary roles are public-interest advocacy and high-quality professional development for its members.

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