

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS

FORUM

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The media's role in building a new and outgoing Europe

This was the theme of an International Communications Forum held in the Czech Republic from 8 to May 1998 sponsored by the City of Pardubice and the Syndicate of Czech Journalists and under the a pices of the Czech Senate. The following report is from an article in The Prague Post, 27 May 1998.

A number of significant topics arose from the International Communications Forum (ICF) meetings in the East Bohemian city of Pardubice. Much importance was attached to the attitude of the media toward their audiences: that the public be treated as citizens, not consumers. The media are dealing with individuals, albeit millions of them, and not with an amorphous mass whose only value is assessed in economic terms of purchasing power and viewer ratings.

'Radio journalists from Albania, led by Shefqet Meko, told how they had decided to treat their listeners as human beings at the height of the dangerous crisis in their country last year. They apologised on the national radio for not having warned the public about the fraudulent nature of pyramid selling and for any misinformation that might have been broadcast in news programmes.



William Porter
ICF Chairman

'A specific issue given much priority was that of cross-information among neighbouring countries, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. Small nations often receive more news about the United States, Japan and other big powers than about the lands next door to them. The Czech Republic and Poland were cited as examples of this, with little information given by the media on political, social and cultural events just across the border. There is a tendency to seek news from the dominant English-language news services and to avoid the more time-consuming task translating from less widely spoken tongues.

'One Czech participant expressed the hope that this country's media would report more on Poland, Hungary and particularly Slovakia. One of the Czech Republic's first NATO missions, it was suggested, would be to bring Slovakia back toward post-1989 democracy before a new curtain -- iron, ice or lace forms.

'As for translations into the Central and East European languages that were (with the exception of Russian) much neglected during the period of Soviet domination, the case of Lithuania was taken up by Darius Cuplinskas, deputy director of the George Sorosfunded Open Society Institute's Centre for Publishing Development in Budapest.

'A Canadian of Lithuanian descent, Cuplinskas said that for 50 years there had been no translations into Lithuanian other than from Russian. His centre has

initiated a publishing programme to translate the 1,000 most important books in science, sociology and other subjects into Lithuanian, Latvian and other hitherto minority tongues. The centre also has a programme to encourage publication of objective history and sociology texts for Russian schools; this will run into tens of millions of copies.

'Issues raised by the Internet were broached at the Forum by Dr Ivan Klimes, a leading scientific journals publisher, with particular regard to what is available on its Web pages. Stress was placed on checking - from other, more reliable sources - any information (news or scientific) obtained from Hungary and particularly Slovakia. the completely uncontrolled entries on the Internet. All other media sources have gatekeepers: editors for the press, producers for television and radio, publishers for books and journals.

'What about the Internet's easy access to pornography, paedophilia and racism? Although individual nations can pass legislation endeavouring to control this, it is unlikely that there will ever be any kind of international enforcement of restrictions. The main hope is that there will develop a widespread social climate generated by the users against depraved use of the medium.



Jan Pieklo

'As our co-host, Jaroslava Moserova -- the senator representing Pardubice who is vice-president of the Czech Senate -- put it: "Just as hate breeds hate, tolerance breeds tolerance and responsibility breeds responsibility. "

'An informed public is extremely necessary for democracy to function. This was emphasised by Torben Krogh, Chairman of the Danish School of Journalism. The major purpose of the media is to inform and to explain events to the public so that people can make the right decisions about political and social issues. It is

not the media's business to make those decisions. We were not elected to solve problems, but we can help create a climate in which they can be solved.

'Throughout the sessions, the adjectives "new" and "outgoing" recurred. The public is always seeking something new in the sense that life can be better than it was in the past. But outgoing is something different. That implies we are not merely building a Europe devoted to defending its own interests and living standards, but one primarily committed to establishing the values of civilisation and a fairness of distribution that will benefit the whole world.'