



Warsaw and the River Vistula

# **INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS FORUM, KAZIMIERZ DOLNY, POLAND**

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# FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

## -THE DILEMMA OF THE MEDIA

"How free is free?" was the question close to the surface at a conference arranged jointly by the International Communications Forum and the Polish Journalists Association. It took place from 1 to 4 December in the Association's Conference Centre in the mediaeval town of Kazimierz Dolny on the banks of the Vistula River. 35 Poles from the print and broadcasting media met with 20 colleagues from nine other countries, including Albania, the Czech Republic and Lithuania as well as from Western Europe and the USA.

A Presidential election had just taken place in which the Solidarity leader, Lech Walesa, narrowly lost to a former Communist politician, Aleksander Kwasniewski. A number of conference participants had been active with Solidarity and were, naturally, unhappy at this outcome. But others, especially the younger journalists, retained an open mind. Poland now has a President, a Government and a Parliament largely dominated by former Communist allegiances. However none of them are talking about a return to Marxism, or turning their backs on the free market system or re- establishing a dictatorship. Mental processes and economic structures have moved too far for that to be acceptable.

Andrzej Sawicki, President of the Association, and William Porter, Chairman of the Forum, led the conference, with a Pole and a visitor co-chairing each of the working sessions.



William Porter, Chairman

Henryk Wozniakowski, President of the Znak Publishing House of Krakow and a leading figure in Polish book publishing, chairing the opening session said, "We have to realise our responsibility to create a sound culture. We have experienced the totalitarian anti-culture, which was alien to Christian and Western civilisation. It operated by imposition, not persuasion. More recently we have been faced with so-called New Age ideas, a post-modern anti-culture, that accepts chaos. Each of these anti-cultures faces us with a challenge as to how the media can restore true values. We have to maintain integrity with authority, but we cannot be neutral." Andrzej Sawicki said that the failure of the media had been to present society with a false set of values, as though life only consisted of murders and two-headed calves.

Robert Webb, former Washington Bureau Chief of *The Cincinnati Enquirer* led a session on "Balance in News Reporting and Presentation". Referring to changes in his personal approach he said, "As one who once revelled in conflict, especially between politicians, I have learned the joys of ferreting out the positive elements in a situation and of writing in a way that seeks to heal rather than to hurt, to inspire rather than to depress."

Simon Scott Plummer, Chief Foreign Leader Writer of *The Daily Telegraph*, UK, emphasised the need for scepticism, but not cynicism, in reporting on politicians, major companies, and powerful interests. "Being on the right side, for a journalist," he said, "is being on the side of mankind."

Dr Jaroslava Moserova, President of the Czech Commission for UNESCO, and a playwright, co-chaired the session on "The Impact of the Media on Human Behaviour for Good or Ill" with Jan Klosowicz, President of the Press Centre for Central and Eastern Europe, based in Warsaw. Both spoke of the remarkable influence of the theatre during the communist period and how, reading between

the lines, it had been used to mock and destroy false ideas. Their common concern now was how the visual media could become a force for good in the lives of people.

The world of information super- highways and the Internet was ably represented by Robin Williamson, Managing Director of Context, a British-based Database and CD-ROM publisher, and Alick Sytor, an information technologist from Brussels. They spoke of the great value of this instant and universal communication scene, but were also concerned about its dangers, unless ethical considerations were given priority. "In the end," said Sytor, "wisdom comes from silence and reflection."

Participants, returning through Warsaw on 4 December, were given a 'meet the Warsaw Media' reception by Maciej Gorski, President of the Polish Information Agency at their Press Centre.■

# CORE VALUES FOR THE MEDIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

## DEVELOPMENT OF A BASIC CODE BY THE POLISH ASSOCIATIONS

Across the world, newspapers, journalists' unions and, sometimes, governments have toiled long and hard in earlier years to propose or impose codes of practice and behaviour for media professionals. But in recent decades this type of endeavour has proceeded at a low key, if at all. We have been going through a period when we did not wish to be hindered by restrictive concepts or even ethical values. We might have enjoyed this apparent freedom, but it happens to have coincided with a decline in the standards of personal and corporate behaviour, that could threaten the continuity of a stable society.

In this context an initiative to seek an effective basis of values for the media has come from the former Communist-led nation of Poland. A pioneer of this has been Monsignor Wieslaw Nieweglowski, the Primate's Chaplain to the Arts. He was to have chaired a session on the subject at Kasimierz Dolny but, due to illness, his speech was read by Krzysztof Golebiowski of the Catholic Information Agency. Some excerpts follow:

"Freedom of the media has come to Poland along with the transformation of the country's political system. The fact that the media was freed from censorship, traditions and limitations did not cause it automatically to take on its proper function of serving democracy and society. Sensationalism came before truth, independence before responsibility, digging up filth before respect and trying to appeal to an audience before sincerity. It has turned out that freedom is much more difficult to maintain than was taking action to procure it under oppression, and it requires serious and mature treatment. Newly-given rights are closely connected with responsibilities.

## Defining a Charter

"So freedom is not the final norm. When it does not follow properly understood ideas of journalistic professionalism, which includes ethics, confusion develops. Journalistic professionalism does not exist without ethics.

"With this idea in mind the representatives of each of the fourteen media unions, societies and associations, which group together print, radio and television in Poland, undertook the difficult task of defining a Charter of Ethics. This has been completed and is now awaiting approval by the individual bodies. In my opinion this is a big success for the Polish journalistic community. Of course, we still have a long way to go in terms of it being respected in practice. However, this attempt to bring order into our own media marketplace should be seen as a way of seeking values and principles at the onset of the 21st Century.

"As time goes on, the mass media continually expand their offering of shallow programming, propagating perversion and hedonism, advocating an easy and nice lifestyle, seemingly without any sense of responsibility. A religion of 'individual success' as a way of life, and even something to honour, takes up increasingly more space in the panorama of the media.

"Pope John Paul II, during his pilgrimage to Latin America, said, 'Specialists in the field of the mass media, do not twist and warp the soul of people, by means of your authority, providing them with incomplete information, promoting exclusively a society of abundance. Be, rather, spokes- persons for people's integrity and their necessary requirements. Be a tool of justice, truth and love.'

"We cannot just stand by and bear witness to the progressing dilapidation of moral values. The building of goodness is needed in the light of the future. It is necessary to show the sense of sacrifice, without which true love and true humanity do not exist. A visiting journalist, observing Mother Teresa of Calcutta

washing some repulsive wounds, whispered to her, 'I would not do that for a million dollars.' Mother Teresa answered, 'Nor would I!'

"Everyone who works in the media should be aware that what they write, say or convey is always directed to a given person and not to anonymous, average and undefined individuals.

The creation of interpersonal relations, based on truth and love is the goal of journalistic service. Media, being close to people's problems, may enrich family life, bring people closer together, encourage solidarity, increase general knowledge and strengthen moral and spiritual convictions." ■

# THE POLISH MEDIA CHARTER OF ETHICS

We, journalists, editors, producers and broadcasters; respecting the inalienable right of the human being to know the truth; bearing in mind the principle of the common good; conscious of the role of the media in human life and society; do accept this Charter and declare that we will perform our work in accordance with the following principles:

The Principle of Honesty which means that we shall do our best to ensure that the information which we transmit shall reflect the true facts and will place them in their proper context. If we realise that we have given untrue information, we shall correct it as soon as possible.

The Principle of Objectivity which means that the writer depicts reality, independently of his or her own views, and reliably reports the different points of view of those concerned.

The Principle of the Division of Information and Comment which means that the story is constructed in such a way that the reader or viewer can clearly distinguish between facts and opinion.

The Principle of Truth which means acting in accordance with one's own conscience and for the good of the recipient: not submitting oneself to wrong influences or to bribery and corruption; and refusing to act against one's personal beliefs.

The Principle of Respect and Tolerance which means respect for human dignity, human rights, personal property and, in particular, the privacy and good name of the individual.

The Principle of the Superiority of the Audience which means that the basic rights of the readers, listeners and viewers have priority over the interests of journalists, editors, producers and broadcasters.

The Principle of Freedom and Responsibility which means that the freedom of the media imposes on all media professionals responsibility for the content and form of the message and its consequences upon people.■

## FREE SOCIETY, FREE MEDIA, FREE JOURNALISTS!

This session included contributions from three experienced journalists: Michal Komar, Editor-in-Chief of the Warsaw daily, *Sztandar*, and President of the Polish Newspaper Editors Association; Bernard Margueritte, for twenty years a Foreign Correspondent in Poland and East Europe for the French press, radio and television; and Michael Finley, Governor of the International Press Foundation in London.

Was it enough to have a free society, a free media and free journalists, asked Margueritte. He took the view that it was not. He backed this up with a number of critical assessments by leading media practitioners in recent years, citing Dan Rather, the famous CBS TV anchorman, "We have answered to the worst and not the best in ourselves and our audiences." Ralph Dahrendorf wrote in 1990, "We have seen such an erosion of values in the Western press that we are not well placed to advise East Europe on how to run a free press."



Bob Webb (left) with Bernard  
Margueritte

In a survey by the Warsaw Institute of Journalism in 1993, 88% of journalists complained about political pressures, 80% about ownership pressures and 60% felt insecure. One newspaper editor had said that he received phone calls on the same day from the President's and the Prime Minister's offices giving conflicting

demands. Many journalists felt that their job was less to inform the public and more to represent the interests of their sponsors.

### A sense of mission

Margueritte said the answer to these contradictions lay with the journalists themselves: "If we have free journalists do we have responsible journalists, who have a sense of mission, a sense of serving the public? The media is as responsible as the people who work in it. Each must first rediscover his spiritual dimension and then, quoting John Driscoll, Vice President of the *Boston Globe*, 'extend the sacred to the workplace, where Judaeo-Christian values can deal effectively with most journalistic dilemmas.'" He concluded, "We have to rebuild ourselves first and then rebuild our society in a way that moral and spiritual values will be respected. So, let us do it!"

Michal Komar was also convinced that freedom in itself was not enough. "Following the fall of Communism, freedom was taken as a moral alibi," he said, "but it soon transpired that freedom did not necessarily go hand in hand with ethical values. Newspapers found themselves to be players in an economic game and became debased by it. Journalists were subjected to bribery and corruption by advertisers, banks and commercial interests. This situation, made worse by a shortage of capital, also enabled political corruption to return.

"In Poland we now have more than 150 private radio stations. The first private national TV network has established itself and there will be more. We have widespread access to satellite receiving dishes and the Internet is growing at a high rate. We have all these means of transferring information but shall we be able to use them in an honest way? And may we not find old habits coming back to haunt us? There could be efforts to take away the freedom that we have won.

"Are we defenceless? No! Because we have learned what it is to tell the truth. That true information is not only a moral course, but that it helps to make our

daily working lives more effective in public and in private. It will not be so easy for this sense of truth to be taken away. But the danger obliges us in the media to face our responsibilities. To tell the truth is a greater moral duty, even more now than before. We must talk about decency and morality. Freedom begins in the press room. A free society cannot function without a free press."

### [Integrity and courage](#)

Michael Finley of the International Press Foundation, emphasised that the word 'free' was much abused and that the media were always having to ask themselves, "Freedom from what, to whom and to do what?" He continued, "Freedom of the press in most societies is constrained by law in some countries directly affecting the media, and in others as part of the general law. Additionally there are social taboos which will constrain the press irrespective of law." He cited several examples from recent history where the press had been under pressures not to reveal information about highly placed persons and not to be critical, even towards evil doers, where the national interest might be harmed.

"In the end," concluded Finley, "it is down to the integrity and courage of individuals, even without total protection, to stand up for their beliefs."■