

*Speech delivered by ICF President Bernard Marguritte  
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## **The Mission of the Media**

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. This a great joy, as always, to be in Scotland, to see that the spirit of the Auld Alliance, of the Scottish-French friendship, is very much alive. It is also a privilege to be in this prestigious house and an honour to be part of this remarkable gathering.

That being said, there is however a basic question I like to ask you today. Should we, people of the media, feel happy? Should we be happy, as media people? Should we be proud of what we are doing? Or should we rather ask why, according to all surveys world-wide, only 17-18% of the people say they respect journalists? We are just above politicians and second-hand car dealers! Is that a matter of pride? There is a joke that illustrates the situation. One day the pope and a journalist die. Both arrive together in front of Saint Peter. First surprise, Saint Peter takes care of the journalist first and shows him the splendid apartment, with beautiful furniture, ready for him. Then Saint Peter goes back to the pope and introduces him to the tiny room, 2 by 3, prepared for him. The pope doesn't want to protest, of course, but try to make sure that no mistake has been made. Saint Peter confirms and adds: 'it was intended that way, your Holiness must understand, popes we have had here already 265, but journalists, he is the first one!'" Well, may be it is high time to send a few more of us to heaven?

Isn't it time to ask what was our mission supposed to be? We had, we have two main tasks. The first one is, inside each country, to give our audience everything they need to know (and not only everything they want to know), in order for the people to know what is happening, why it is happening, so that they could make up their own mind. This is the only way, used to say my master Hubert Beuve-Mery, the founder of "Le Monde", for the people to be citizens and the only way for us to live in a true democracy. We were indeed supposed to go from information to inter-formation.

As John Paul II said while visiting Poland, “the media should defend the respect for the dignity of the person”. Johnny Apple Jr., bureau chief of “The New York Times” in Washington, presented the same truth in a different way during a speech at Harvard University: “the media, he said, were supposed to find out and understand and explain what was going on here and abroad so that the public could understand and make an informed judgment”. Indeed, as points out Bill Kovach, the long-time curator of the Nieman Foundation at Harvard and now chairman of The Committee of Concerned Journalists, “the essential mission of journalism is to be a public service for democracy”. Alas, we are not fulfilling our mission. The media have indulged, as say the Americans, in “infotainment” or even “showbizzification”.

No wonder therefore that the people express distrust in the media, read less and less, stop to care about public affairs and finally don’t even bother to vote. Then we are proud to say that we are living in a democracy, but this democracy is a fake, reserved to a self-proclaimed “elite”. But, in such a situation further down the road we will not need media any more! Davis Merritt wrote rightly in his book “Public Journalism and Public Life”: “it is no coincidence that the decline in journalism and the decline in public life have happened at the same time. In modern society, they are co-dependent; public life needs the information and perspective that journalism can provide and journalism needs a viable public life because without one, there is no need for journalism”.

Indeed we, in the media, should always remember that, if for sure we are working in a business that must be profitable, we are not producers, among many others, trying to sale goods to consumers with the only goal to make as much money as possible. We are blessed to stand there as human beings and citizens addressing human beings and citizens. This is quite another dimension we should not have forgotten. As we should not have forgotten that we ought to be, as said Vaclav Havel, “the power of the powerless” or “the voice of the voiceless”.

So our first mission was, inside each country, to be the principal support of democracy. But our second task was to report about far away countries, to bring closer to our audience the civilisation and culture and, yes, the problems, the fears, the dreams of those far away people, so that we could all move from understanding to mutual understanding.

But we have failed to do so! Look at what happened in the United States after 9/11. We had many remarkable articles in the best US newspapers. The authors were asking: why is it so that many millions and millions around the world hate us, Americans? Are we not as great as we thought? And rapidly they started to give answers: maybe it is because by building army bases near the holy Mecca, we offended many people? Maybe it is because by promoting all around the world a Hollywood-made pseudo culture, we offended many people? Maybe it is because by proposing as the only valid solution a unique version of globalisation we offended many people, etc, etc. But they should have known earlier! And the reason they did not know was because the media did not fulfil their mission and were not informing about the reactions and the feeling of the people around the world.

Speaking about globalisation, the media are both affected by globalisation and also affecting it. We are witnessing a concentration of media power in a few big groups, acting worldwide. At the same time those corporations have a tendency to sell to the world this unique version of the globalisation, the sole valid without discussion, as we say in French “la pensée unique”. It is therefore about time to see how the media can better react to globalization and have a positive impact on it.

The first result of the concentration in a few media groups is that it is becoming more and more difficult to respect and promote the local identity, be it of a town, a country or a culture. As we have “fast food”, always the same, we do have “fast-news”, the same kind of information, presented the same way worldwide. This has wide reaching consequences: one of the main missions of the media is forgotten. We, in the media, ought to be “media-tors”, go-betweens. As I said, one of our most important and exhilarating tasks was to report about far away people. Now we have a paradoxical situation: we live in a globalised world but we know less and less about each other! What do we know in France about the American way of life (or in America about the French way of life?), about Arab culture or Jewish traditions? It is my contention that if there is so much hatred and violence in this world, it is among other things because the media are not fulfilling their role. Hatred comes often from a lack of knowledge of the others.

It is sometimes good to go back to the Readings. For example John 8:32, when Jesus says: “you will know the truth and the truth will set you free”. By informing about other people, other cultures, other civilizations, we would allow our readers, listeners, viewers to be

free, free of pre-conceptions, mistakes, misunderstandings. We should move from information to understanding, from understanding to mutual understanding. Otherwise we will continue to have the world we are living in, a world where hatred is answering hatred, violence answering violence, in an infernal circle. The illness of our age, ladies and gentlemen, is not a lack of information but a lack of meaning. And it's not that we have too much freedom, rather we have no real freedom, because only the truth can make us really free. We live in an age of great hope but also great confusion. Tearing things down is easy. Building things up is hard. We have to be builders and unifiers and sources of meaning for the people who encounter our work.

But, at a smaller level, people feel frustrated that the media are less and less addressing their concerns at home, are becoming impersonal. Not only Europeans or Arabs may feel that the worldwide media are not respecting their culture. This is happening even inside every country, and for that matter also inside the United States, in spite of the fact that there seems to be an American imperialism in the media, leading to the fact that 70% of all the films presented on world televisions are "US-made". When The International Communications Forum had a conference in Denver three years ago, our friends there were complaining that since most of the Denver media are owned by corporations with headquarters in Los Angeles or New York it is more and more difficult to respect the local identity, to have articles or programs about topics specific to the Denver area, like the north-south relation (due to the large number of Hispanic people living in Colorado) or the environment. The same complaint was made to me by editors in South Carolina, who felt that it was impossible for them to reflect the particular culture of the south, since their papers were directed from California!

In "Le Monde Diplomatique", Ignacio Ramonet has shown how the industrial giants, from the utilities, electronic activities, telephone, water or armament sectors have jumped into the media world. America Online is controlling Netscape, Time, Warner Bros and CNN; Bill Gates is the king of software but also of the press photography through his agency Corbis; Rupert Murdoch owns a variety of British and American papers, like The Times, The Sun, The New York Post, a satellite network BskyB and also a major film production company the 20thCentury Fox. Some are trying in Europe to follow the model. Bertelsmann has a lot of papers, radios and TVs; the same is true with Sergio Berlusconi in Italy. In France our two biggest groups are controlled by Serge Dassault and Jean-Luc Lagardère, both involved in the armament industry.

As writes Ramonet, “all those concentrations are a danger for the pluralism of the press and for democracy. Moreover they put the emphasis on profits, instead of quality”. The president of “Le Monde Diplomatique” continues: “one of the precious rights of the human being is the right to freely communicate one’s thoughts and opinions. In democratic societies, the freedom of speech is not only guaranteed, it goes together with another fundamental right: the right to be well informed. But this right is endangered by the concentration of the media, by the merging of newspapers once independent into hegemonic groups. Should the citizens accept this hijacking of the freedom of the press? Can they tolerate that information is reduced to a banal commodity?”

Interestingly, at the same time Paul Krugman is addressing the same concerns in “The New York Times”. He says pleasantly that in the US you get your news from what he calls “AOLTimeWarnerGeneralElectricDisneyWestinghouseNewsCorp.” and he adds: “the handful of organizations that supply most people with their news have major commercial interests that inevitably tempt them to slant their coverage, and more generally to be deferential to the ruling party”. One recent example is the fact that the 100 000-people anti-war demonstration in Washington (before the war in Iraq) “was almost ignored by some key media outlets”. And Paul Krugman concludes: “for the time being, blatant media bias is still limited by old rules and old norms of behavior. But soon the rules will be abolished, and the norms are eroding before our eyes. Do the conflicts of interest of our highly concentrated media constitute a threat to democracy? I’ve reported; you decide”.

As said John Paul II, we are observing “the intrusive, even invasive, character of the logic of the market, which reduces more and more the area available to the human community for voluntary and public action at every level”. Furthermore, warns the Pope, “globalisation must not be a new version of colonialism. It must respect the diversity of cultures which, within the universal harmony of peoples, are life’s interpretive keys”.

Why are the world media addressing only marginally those urgent concerns? Isn’t it our mission to do so? Instead of promoting an inhuman version of globalisation, should not the media exert their influence by trying to shape globalisation? The media can and should play a prominent role in the battle to build a better world, a more human world. But, for that we have to find back our dignity and the sense of our mission.

As we can see, what we are in is not only a fight for better media, but a call to replace the civilisation of materialism, hedonism and consumerism by the civilisation of respect for the human person, the civilisation of life, the civilisation of love. This should be one of the main tasks of the media at the beginning of this new century. I am sure that in this battle, the people of the International Communications Forum (working already in 114 countries, we are trying from within the media to restore our own dignity and merit again the public confidence) and all the people of good will, we all in this room, we will be together. Yes, we in the media, we do have to change our vision and look in the same direction as the people of good will on this planet. You remember, I am sure, the remarkable sentence of the French writer Saint-Exupéry: “to love is not to look at each other, it is to look together in the same direction”. We should do just that. At stake, ladies and gentlemen, is our own credibility, as media people and as human beings, and at stake is the future of our societies and our world.