

## **American Media and the World Community**

Raising standards, improving credibility, serving society

With the world anguished by ethnic, religious and racial conflict, poverty and social breakdown, the “Denver 2001” conference challenged media professionals from North America and beyond to rise to a new and more constructive level in the new millennium. It came with public confidence in mass media almost universally low and their owners and employees wringing hands over how to regain the trust of those they serve. The event was initiated by the ICF in association with leading Denver and Colorado media organizations and drew participants from across the world. But the spotlight was on America as the source of 70% of the world’s visual media and a big share of all the rest.

ICF Founder President William E. Porter, a world-traveled onetime foreign correspondent who became a leading figure in British book publishing, confronted the Denver forum with what he believes to be the basic challenge to media today: to help save the current civilization or help build a new one. Either calls for new thinking by media professionals at all levels. The choice, Porter said, is “between good and evil... between freedom and bondage, between fairness and injustice, between truth and lies, between caring and indifference, between peace and war...”

The thinking and lives of millions the world over are shaped for better or worse by the output of American media. That became clear from the Denver discussions by veteran journalists and journalism educators from North America, Europe, Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. They met “to examine their work and seek new ways to lay the foundations for a sound, sane and sustainable global society.” Their ranks included Terry Anderson, the former AP Beirut bureau chief who spent years as a hostage in Lebanon, and Jan Urban, a top Czech journalist who helped lead his country’s struggle for democracy. Also there were such media stars as Sanjoy Hazarika, the New York Times’ former long-time correspondent in India who is now a syndicated columnist and filmmaker, and Fred Brown, the Denver Post political editor and former national president of the Society of Professional Journalists widely respected as a champion of media ethics.

Roger Parkinson, Toronto-based chairman of the Thomson Group and also president of the World Association of Newspapers, brought a ringing challenge to the ICE to move forward from its 10-year record in which it “put the issue of the effect of the media on society on the world’s agenda.” He summoned the Forum to develop a stronger financial base, with “more people and more clout.” Parkinson said the ICF’s “overall goal is noble, to inspire the media to have a good effect on society.”

A dramatic and instructive review of KUSA-TV coverage of the Columbine School massacre came from Patti Dennis, vice-president and news director of the NBC affiliate. She inspired listeners coverage, with her recital of the restraint KUSA coverage exercised to protect families of the student victims.

These were serious media professionals in riveting discussions on how to rebuild public confidence in their work. In a message sent the conference and read by Warsaw-based French correspondent Bernard Margueritte, Nobel Peace laureate Lech Walesa, former president of Poland, struck the conference’s central theme by emphasizing the critical media role in building and preserving democracy. At the same time, he warned that “a

biased press and a press which manipulates information does not only undermine trust in the media, but also in the whole system, in the state and democracy.” A press which thus serves any purpose other than the public interest fails its mission.

While media may do much that is right, their failings - frequent news bias and exploitation of sex, conflict and violence - erode public trust. Margueritte said that worldwide only 17% or 18% of the public respects journalists. “We have lost our influence,” he said. “In France, shows a survey, the opinions of the journalists are totally different from the opinions of the people on a variety of issues, and when a newspaper endorses a candidate, he usually loses”.

The Denver conference came in the wake of last fall’s “Sarajevo 2000” World Media Assembly which launched the Sarajevo Commitment pledging signers to the highest ethical and performance standards. The Commitment was rushed into 17 languages, including Russian, Arabic and Albanian, with a dozen more on the way. Jay Rosen, chair of the Department of Journalism at New York University, had described it as “moving, highly eloquent and a document of historic importance” and brought to Denver his convictions on the role it should play in a “renaissance” of American journalism. Meanwhile, Martyn Lewis, the former top anchor of BBC-TV who spoke to the Denver audience via video, reads the Commitment to and draws overwhelming responses from audiences in Britain and elsewhere. He is a strong critic of the overwhelming domination of the negative in newspapers and broadcasts. Lewis says journalists should weigh positive news stories on the same scales as the negative.

Anderson, just ending a six-year stint teaching journalism at Ohio University, asked a show of hands from those in his audience who’d had problems with news stories mentioning them. A forest of hands shot up, illustrating his point: “Accuracy, the basic stuff we try to give our students in our first journalism classes is accuracy, fairness and integrity.” But he said these “are the things the public says to us are the things we don’t actually do, in practice. That’s why they don’t like us. They think we are hypocrites. We don’t practice what we preach. We are not going to get the public’s trust back until we show them that we are worthy of it.”

A dominant note in the conference was the profit pressure Wall Street exerts on media conglomerates, often at the expense of sound journalism. Anderson said it gets “harder and harder” to say core journalistic principles won’t be violated. He challenged journalists to “teach these corporate executives that yes, this is a business but it is more than a business, there is a limit to the amount of profit you can expect to make... because the journalists in the news business are not going to let you bend their principles.”

# **Urgent: Renaissance in American Journalism**

## **A perspective on the Sarajevo Commitment**

Just as Lincoln's Gettysburg Address engraved itself on the mind of a nation, so history may well cite the Sarajevo Commitment as a marking document in the drive to restore public trust in mass communications.

The Commitment was launched at the World Media Assembly in Sarajevo last September and pledges signers to the highest ethical and performance standards. It binds them in a compact with those they serve.

At the recent ICF conference in Denver, Jay Rosen, chair of the Department of Journalism at New York University, compared it to the Jay F Gettysburg Address and to the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He branded it "the boldest work of this Forum" in the "global public square. American journalism needs its own renaissance".

As the father of civic or public journalism, Rosen said that "you cannot devote your life to journalism unless you believe civil society can work... journalists can be neutral about many things but they must remain committed to civil society." Civic journalism seeks new, constructive and enduring links between news purveyors and consumers. Typically, such journalism tries to make news operations more transparent and involved with those they serve.

In a spirited discussion on "The Media and Public Society," Rosen set out to distinguish between journalism and media. Responding to a question from Canadian journalist Henry Heald, he said, "Journalism is a much smaller and craft-based social activity, and the media is an industrial enterprise."

Thus in his view, media are the institutions, conglomerates and the like that employ journalists, but that journalism - news, features and commentary - is separate. Rosen's effort to distinguish between the two was initiated by a plea for help from Willard Rowland, president of KBDITV (PBS) and a former journalism dean. Rowland said that "with regard to this problem of journalism and mass communication education, there is tremendous confusion in the academy about what should be taught in these areas..." He said the problem was global.

Rosen also said media "is basically the attention industry. Journalism is just a practice within that industry, among many other practices. It is older than the media, it is specifically concerned with democracy, civil society and the functioning of (civil society).. Fundamentally, I don't think the media really cares about journalism. It is useful because it provides a public service 'glow' to the enterprise."

Rowland rapped what he said was the failure of "media industries" to give institutions that teach journalism the financing they need and called on the ICF for help. Rosen cited what he said was another problem: "American journalists believe that: they really don't we anything to learn from Europeans. Most of the time they believe that! They don't see the flow going from East to West. They are not always aware that they hold is prejudice, but they do."

But Rosen feels strongly that the Sarajevo Commitment should be a lighthouse for journalists everywhere. In part, the Commitment says, “We shall inform to the best of our ability, with clarity and honesty, with independence of mind, what is truly happening in the world at the level of the individual, the family, the community and the region. We shall present the facts and explain the facts, and some of us will aim with modesty to interpret them. As we succeed in doing this, we believe that you, the people, will be enabled make the right decisions, to elect and appoint the best leaders and to build a fair, just and compassionate society.”

# The Sarajevo Commitment

## Force for renewing world media

The Sarajevo Commitment has emerged as a global trumpet call for renewal in mass communications. Working like yeast through the media world, it is now in 17 languages, including Japanese, Hindi, Russian, Arabic and Albanian, and headed into a dozen more. Signers pledge themselves to the highest ethical and performance standards, recognizing the past failures of mass media.

Former BBC news anchor Martyn Lewis is inundated with requests for copies when he reads it to audiences, as he did to 600 educators in the North of England and to 300 senior executives in fu Nairobi, Kenya.

Ignacio Ramonet, the director of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, calls the Commitment “the ecology of information.”

Professor Francis Balle of the French Press Institute signed the document on the spot and said he would get copies to all his students. It was available to delegates at last fall’s national convention of the Society of Professional Journalists in Columbus, Ohio, and distributed at the SPJ Mid-Atlantic regional conference in Ocean City, Md. last spring. A key executive of the Washington, D.C. based Catholic News Service was so struck by the document he said he would promote it at the national convention of Catholic editors.

The woman president of the Ghana Journalists Association has sent a copy to each of her members. The Commitment won a Special Commendation at the National Awards Day of the Jamaica Press Association. It was published in full in *AN-NAHAR*, Lebanon’s leading Arabic daily which reaches most Mideast capitals. The Journalists Union of Nizhny Novgorod, Russia’s third largest city, also promotes it.

Almost daily comes news of how the commitment is being used to inspire constructive journalism and regain public confidence.