

FREEDOM OF THE MEDIA

I would like to begin by expressing my appreciation to the Council for Social Studies for deciding to hold their Annual Conference in Derry this year in recognition of IMPACT '92, a major self help exercise by the people of Derry, organised by Derry City Council and supported by all sections of the people of the City. I naturally hope that all of you having come from many parts will go away impressed by our city and by the major effort that has been put in by all sections of our people to build a new Derry. I naturally hope that the visitors from the press and media would take particular note and reflect their impressions in their outlets. In the context of the subject of this conference that last remark might be described at best as trying to influence the media and at worst to manipulate them! Let me say that I would apologise for neither if it leads to the promotion of this City and its people!

The first point that I would like to make about the Conference as a whole and this evenings discussion in particular is that such an in depth conference on this subject is not only timely, it is long overdue. It is long overdue because of the enormous changes in our world that have taken place in this generation alone, in the lifetime of most people in this room, changes that have themselves naturally contributed to changes in what was called the press and have created what we now call the media - radio and television and the massive development of both mass and instant communication.

In our generation, in the past fifty years, the world has become a much smaller place because of developments in all forms of communication. This generation is even now going through the most far reaching technological revolution that the world has ever seen. This has already had its major effect on political structures as witnessed by the evolution of European Union. And of course that technological revolution is all about communications and the method of communication, something which has enormous implications for what we call the press and the media or indeed the method of keeping our public as fully informed as possible. Indeed it surely will not be long and it may already be happening when a detailed news service may be supplied to computers in individual homes.

In addition to all of that the public today are a much more educated public than they were fifty years ago and that too has implications for the subject that we are discussing this evening.

To underline and clarify the point that I am making let us go back some of those years. Fifty years ago - a very short time - life for the vast majority of people on this island was totally local. Travel to other countries - apart from the emigrant - was very rare as was even travel within the country. How many of our grandparents would have been to Galway, Cork or Kerry? People walked or took buses. Motor cars were a very confined species.

Your neighbourhood was your world and loyalties were strongly local eg myself. Communication was direct. Public meetings in districts were both regular and normal and were the means of discussing public issues in detail and questioning public representatives. Journalism reflected that world. Journalism was about direct, detailed and even verbatim reporting. Journalists in those days went to a meeting took down every word in shorthand and people were reported verbatim. When we talked of the press everyone knew what we were talking about. Newspapers were newspapers and were the major means of informing the public. The press was the fourth estate. It was independent. It had no competition. It controlled its own standards and entry into the journalistic profession was controlled by the journalistic body - the national union of journalists.

The changes in our world that I have already mentioned have had an enormous and national influence on all of that. Since the world is a smaller place the news must reflect that world and not just local issues. Since the population is much more educated more people read newspapers and are much more discerning. The reporter is therefore no longer just a reporter. In a sense every reporter today is an editor because when he/she covers a public occasion and major speeches are made, what is needed is a summary and it is the reporter who decides what the summary is or what are the important issues in his/her opinion that were raised. In one way that has changed the whole nature of the job and has substantially increased the influence of the journalistic world. It has also increased their burden of responsibility. The print media has also obviously been heavily influenced as well in the past fifty years by the emergence of what we call "the media" - radio and television and of course all that competition in communication has had its influence in shaping the nature of the print media.

And indeed in the context of tonight's discussion what exactly do we mean by "media". When talking about "the freedom of the media". Is it simply news and current affairs programmes or does it include the chat show? Is it simply news and current affairs programmes or does it include the chat show? It is interesting in the current American election how the major candidates have taken to using the chat show in order to communicate in more depth. This is something that most public figures are conscious of today. Almost the only way of communicating one's views in depth or in detail to the public is by writing an article for the newspapers but even there one is almost always now given a word limit per article and of course the radio TV approach is reduced almost to the "sound bite". It appears to be the media view that lengthy interviews switch off the listener. I wonder. Hence the sound bite approach which in itself again eg America has influenced public figures to communicate ideas as if they were selling soap, particularly at election time.

So this discussion is overdue and therefore timely, given the enormous changes that have taken place and the enormous influences at work. There has not been to my knowledge any real in depth discussion of the revolutionary change in the journalistic profession in one generation alone. Given the importance of our subject this evening to the very existence of democracy it is clear that such discussion is not only necessary but fundamental to the whole revolution that is taking place in democracy itself.

In addition to praising the Social Studies Council for the choice of subject and the timing of it for the reasons I have given, the second substantial point that I wish to make this evening is that the real people who should be carrying out this discussion and the journalistic and media profession themselves. I will return to that point later because I believe it to be fundamental to the whole question of freedom of the press.

The first priority and the first item therefore to discuss this evening, given the changes that have taken place is to define precisely what we are talking about. The freedom of the press? The freedom of the media? What is the press in that sense? What is the media? To be clearer by being more simplistic what is a newspaper Today? Are some of the tabloids newspapers or are they sea sheets, scandal sheets or bugs sheets? Are they any different in purpose from plain pieces of printed advertising material that is pushed through our doors. Are they not in reality pure advertising material and the use of scandal, sex or bingo is simply a major means of increasing sales so that more advertising can be attached. They are certainly not newspapers in the true meaning nor are they in any way transmitters of major news issues that go to the heart of government or the development of the democratic process. In short are they the press? Do they fall within a definition of the press as it is traditionally known and as it has developed in this day and age.

In addition there has been another serious development very evident in Britain in recent times. It has always been accepted that newspapers have an editorial policy. This has been reflected in support for particular parties editorially at election time. No one has ever objected to that. However now, particularly in Britain it has become very normal, particularly at election time, to present the news in a way that will help a particular political party. That has been particularly evident in Britain and in helping to assure the maintenance of what is becoming a one party state. The damage to democracy is self-evident and are such newspapers the press in the traditional sense, given that their owners are more interested in profit than in news and don't even believe in balancing the two and given that both they and their editors are subject to receiving honours

from the state etc thus underlining and perpetuating loyalty a particular party. The same is rapidly emerging on the TV scene with the auction of TV licences thus again ensuring that commercial television is being forced down the American road of profit only and therefore producing a whole series of programmes that appeal only to the lowest common denominator and serious in depth discussion is wiped out because the numbers won't watch it and the advertisers won't pay. At the end of the day it all has a serious effect on democracy eg America 40% vote for President!

The first and major question then to be decided in discussing the freedom of the press or media is to define clearly what is meant by press or media. To every right there corresponds a responsibility so that when we are discussing what is in effect a pillar of democracy - the freedom of the press, the fourth estate, then we must be assured that not only is what we define as the press fully entitled to the right to freedom but that they are fully responsible people, committed to exercising the right with responsibility. The only people who can address this question properly and in depth are the press and media themselves. In a sense what I am asking for is a modern version of the old days of journalism that I mentioned earlier. Let the members of the journalists and media profession meet officially and let them and not the government set up a Press and Media Council following the NUJ model of the old days of the press. Let this Council define clearly what is meant by "press" and "media", who are the "press" and "media" that should exercise this essential right to freedom that goes to the heart of the maintenance of democracy. In addition it is this Council and not a Government appointed one that should investigate all complaints from members of the public against the press and media and most importantly it should set out in clarity a detailed code to which all its own members should adhere. It follows from all of that of course that such a Press and Media Council would control entry into the press and media and would have the authority to expel from its ranks any member who infringes the code.

The extreme danger not just to the independence of the press and media but to the right to freedom of this press and to the upholding of the democratic process is that if the press and media do not themselves exercise the responsibility of upholding the independence of the press and media and of protecting members of the public from any abuse of that right then it is inevitable in the end that Government will move in to protect the public interest and that would be an extremely retrograded step.

Given the nature of membership of both the journalistic and media profession and who would qualify for membership, I have to confirm that I am not fully aware of what internal difficulties there might lie in the way of setting up such a Press and Media Council but I think it essential and in a way it is doing no more than other professions like the Medical and Legal profession do to protect the integrity of their profession and to control entry and exit.

There is of course one other major area in this whole field that requires examination and that is the use - frequently - by government of national security as a reason for withholding information from the public and forbidding the press to do so. A prime example of this was Watergate but in my opinion an even more serious one was the Gulf War. Here was a war that was reputedly launched in the name of the United Nations to bring down an extremely unjust dictator Saddam Hussein. It goes without saying that if he is such a dictator then his real victims are the ordinary people of Iraq. Who were the victims of the Gulf War? Certainly not Saddam Hussein but indeed the ordinary people of Iraq and we do not know till this day how many of them were slaughtered in this so called just war. What the world saw on her TV screens every night was what simply looked like a version of STAR WARS with computerized versions of bombs, represented by dots on a TV screen, always being deadly accurate for their targets. What we never saw is what actually happened when those bombs struck and how many thousands of innocent civilians were killed and what bitterness towards the West has been built up in the East. This ignorance is all due to the so-called principle that in the interests of National Security reporters on the spot only reported exactly what they were told to report or what they were allowed to report. All this based on the outdated principle that if a country is at war the population of that country should not be fully aware of what is happening, including what deaths are being committed in its names.

Here again I believe that part of the answer should be that on matters of national security the Press and Media Council should have full access through specifically appointed members whose duty it would be to assess the true nature of all those matters. Here in our own territory of course we have examples of a similar nature. In this very week we have the Prevention of Terrorism Act being used to try to force journalists to reveal their sources.

We also have Censorships - "killing the messenger will kill the message" - in the form of the Broadcasting Ban which is an utterly ridiculous piece of legislation eg can be interviewed on all matters except politics and on politics if an asterisk voice is used! Then ban drops completely for elections! Opposed on principle - let them defend.

In effect of course all these matters are symptoms of a much deeper disease and until the disease itself is cured, will keep recurring in one form or another as well as different types of repressive legislation. The basis of order in any society is agreement by the people on how that society is governed. That is also the basis of democracy. When that is absent the symptoms will keep recurring so we should devote our energies to attacking the disease.

At the end of the day what we are talking about is what is the best way, giving all the difficulties, giving in particular the problem of conflicting rights is how to put effectively into practice Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which is the bedrock of freedom of the press:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers".

The arbiters and defenders of those rights in relation to the media can only be the press and media themselves. It is an enormous responsibility but who else can carry it? It also reflects the reality of today's world because it is clear to anyone that the major influence on today's world and the most active people are not governments, parliaments etc but the press and media which works every minute of every day. The best way to ensure that their contribution is to a better world for all of us is to ensure that they exercise full responsibility for the fundamental democratic right to freedom that they should have. That means that any abuse of that freedom is a comment on the press themselves and they are unlikely to tolerate that.

What other way is there?