

THE WORLD PRESS CONVENTION  
KUALA LUMPUR

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Honourable Guests; Distinguished Participants; Ladies and Gentlemen;

I had intended to start my Keynote Address by saying: "In the beginning, there was Individual Man, living in splendid isolation, doing "his own thing", behaving exactly as he pleased, unfettered by a single rule, regulation, or code of behaviour of any sort." In actual fact, from the beginning, there never was this Individual Man, born free, living completely unfettered in isolated splendour. From the beginning of time man lived in groups first, the family, then the village, then the district, then the state because he was instinctively gregarious and because he needed the security and the services and values that only living in a group could provide.

2. But living in even the most rudimentary group raised a series of problems. Obviously, the individual members could not do anything that might cause suffering or discomfort to another individual member. Thus a code had to be developed and imposed by common consent. Any code, any rule, any law could not but restrict individual freedom within a group or community. The more developed the society, the more formal and complex the code. Thus customs, traditions, laws, rules and philosophies became institutionalised within each human community.

3. But then, there arose the problem of enforcement. Even if there is a general consensus over the code of behaviour, there will be the inevitable breakers of the code. Obviously if the code breakers are numerous, the stability and integrity of the community and the well-being of other members would be threatened. The need arose for an enforcement authority; in other words, for the conferment of authority on an individual or individuals, on an institution or institutions, to deal with those who break the code. Authority means power and power corrupts, as we shall soon see.

4. The media, like the individual or groups of individuals, is an actor within a human community. In the modern world, however, such is the power of the media that it has often been called the Fourth Estate. In many countries, it has become a powerful force in society, so powerful in fact that kings and presidents bow and scrape before it. What is the proper place of the powerful media within human society? How should it operate? What should be its relationship to the rest of society and to the governmental structure in society? I shall try to concentrate on these basic questions in this Keynote Address.

5. What is considered legitimate, proper and moral varies from system to system, country to country, and of course from time to time. Even the media practitioners themselves cannot agree on these items at any given time. It is also clear that in the last few hundred years there have been four basic philosophies, models or traditions with regard to the concept of Press role and freedom. The first might be called the authoritarian model, the second the Communist model, the third the libertarian model and the fourth the social responsibility model.

6. Each tradition has its particular set of assumptions and arguments about man, the role of the state, the position of the individual and his place within the community and the way the media should function within society. None are completely without virtue, not even the Communist model. On the other hand, none are without flaws of logic or relevance or legitimacy, not even the libertarian model that so many in the Third World, unable to break the shackles of psychological and intellectual neo-colonialism, sometimes aspire to with such wide eyed enthusiasm.

7. My view is a simple one. First, it is essentially up to each country to choose for itself what is the proper system to adopt or the proper tradition to follow. If Democracy or Communism cannot be successfully transplanted unless the soil is right and the climate accommodating, nor can any particular media model. The hectoring and the lecturing from the pious and the powerful will not stop. But each society must have the courage of its convictions.

8. Second, the proper, appropriate system must depend on the objective condition of a society, its aspirations and stage of development. It will vary with time and place. I have no negative assessments about the curbing of Press freedom in Britain and the United States, through the introduction of censorship, during the First and Second World Wars -although I do believe that it is important to remind some of the more fervent but blind preachers what they did when the necessary had to be done. If man, however virtuous, is eventually and invariably reduced to the level of his circumstance, so too is the mass media. It ought to be plain to the inventors of the doctrine of quote 'clear and present danger' unquote that there are many societies today that are under severe stress, that function under a condition of 'clear and present danger', that have no choice but to do what needs to be done. In many of these countries there is no ignorance about what is the ideal in ideal circumstances. To suggest otherwise is not only to be guilty of being unfair but worse, to be guilty of arrogant ignorance.

9. Let me not be misunderstood. I am no apologist for unnecessary repression, for the iron fist, for authoritarianism and for the abuse of governmental power. I am a firm believer in the greatest freedom consonant with the vital interests of society. But there is no moral virtue in the comfortable afflicting the afflicted, in taking a holier than thou attitude.

10. Having said all this, and fully aware of its own deficiencies and dangers, let me state thirdly that for most countries most of the time the morally proper choice is the social responsibility model. Just as Democracy is not a perfect system for the governance of man, simply the best of all forms so far invented by man for his governance, the doctrine of social responsibility with all its imperfections is the best of all forms invented for the guidance of the practice of Press Freedom. The others are simply much worse.

11. Let me start off with the easiest models to demolish: the authoritarian and the Communist models. The authoritarian model is historically the oldest. For centuries in the history of man, it was regarded as fully legitimate, moral and proper. Its basic tenet is that the media is the servant of the government. Full stop.

12. Plato had no reservations. In the 'Republic' he euphemistically recommended that all artists, philosophers and poets who offended against the rigid rules set down by those in authority should be 'sent to another city'. Socrates insisted on his individual right to deviate but recognised the necessity for obedience to authorities to enforce these rules. His solution was to accept the penalty. That penalty was death.

13. Under the authoritarian model, the media should support the policies of the government in place so that the government can achieve its objectives. In the history of the West, much of the media was allowed to remain in the hands of the private sector. But the media had to be controlled: through the granting of licenses or patents, through direct governmental censorship, through prosecution before the courts, through control of raw materials, special taxes on media profit. In the course of time, other methods have been added: state participation in media ownership, state selection of editors and even journalists, the licensing of media practitioners and of course the carefully edited official press releases. Journalists are put on a secret payroll. Editors are alternately threatened with prosecution or seduced by favours. Unlike under the Communist model, the media was often not required to conform completely to the principles and policies of the ruling government. Absence of criticism was often enough. Elizabeth I permitted and sometimes even encouraged a wide latitude of discussion, as long as her right to make the final decision was fully recognised.

14. There are many similarities between the Communist model and the authoritarian model, the first the most widespread today from the point of view of sheer population reach and the second the most pervasive system from the point of view of the number of countries practising it. Both the authoritarian and the communist model believe that the mass media is a servant of the state. Both assert a monopoly of wisdom by those in authority.

15. However, the Communist model requires the mass media to be more active, positive tools for the use of government or the Party for the achievement of societal goals. Communist systems demand more than just non-obstruction and non-criticism and a little help now and then from media practitioners. The media must be constantly active propagandists, agitators, and organisers of public opinion every day of the year and in every column inch. Secondly, the Communist model requires state monopoly of all the means of mass communication.

16. Under the Communist model, because there can only be one truth, the truth as defined by the Communist Party, the media must work assiduously to mould opinion to ensure a oneness of perception and thought. The existence of one view, 'the correct view' is the ideal. A diversity of content may be interesting and entertaining but it is not the job of the media to be interesting or entertaining. A variety of views is not only unnecessary but immoral. Secondly, it is the task of the mass media to be an instrument of revelation rather than information per se.

17. News is not the latest events under the Communist model. It is only a means of interpreting contemporary social processes. Since the editor is a propagandist, agitator and organiser of public thought, he must select the current events to be published guided only by the need to illustrate and reinforce the social process he is trying to teach his readers. Mass communications is a deadly serious business with no place for 'human interest' stories unless they are essential to the teaching of a particular lesson.

18. The weaknesses of the authoritarian and Communist tradition are too evident to require a lengthy exercise in criticism. The fact is that the state and its government, society and its leaders are two separate things. Being of service to society and the state may require the media not to be of service to the powers that be. Because it is in the authoritarian and Communist state that abuses of authority and power are likely to be greatest, ironically it is essentially in the authoritarian and the Communist state that morality demands that the media be a check, that the media be in a confrontationist mode. The watchdog role of the media is needed most in Communist and authoritarian systems where, of course, it is tolerated least.

19. All wisdom does not spring from a single source, truth from a single mind, even a collective mind made up of a large number of intellectual giants. If nothing is to be published, broadcast or televised unless it has been approved by those in authority, power must always be the determinant of truth. Society cannot but suffer from a singleness of thought and a uniformity of content, and not only from boredom. If a community whether it be a family, a village, a nation state or a group of states is to be dynamic rather than to decay, to develop rather than to stagnate, there must be a minimum level of informational diversity and debate.

20. If the authoritarian and Communist models or traditions are ethically improper and counter productive of the needs and development of society, is the libertarian model the one that is morally and productively the best, in theory as well as in practice?

21. The libertarian model assumes that man is a rational animal. The individual is king. Society is his subordinate. The rights and fulfillment of the individual is the ultimate goal of man, society and state. Libertarian theory states that man is a supremely rational animal with an insatiable desire for truth; the only method by which truth can be grasped is by the free competition of opinion in the open marketplace of ideas.

22. To be fair, the libertarian theorists concede that in a free for all, much information reaching the people would be false and some deliberately so. People would be telling and spreading lies as well as truths. However, it was up to the people, not the state, to decide what is true and what is false. The people because they are inherently rational, must be able to digest and discard, in the final analysis ending at the destination called truth.

23. John Stuart Mill made a strong case of the freest expression of opinion. First, he argued, if an opinion is silenced, we will never know if we are in fact silencing the truth. Second, a wrong opinion can contain part of a truth necessary for discovering the whole truth. Third, even if the commonly held view is already the whole truth, the public tends to hold it not on rational grounds but on the basis of prejudice unless it is forced to defend it against the attack of untruths. Fourth, unless the conventional wisdom is attacked from time to time, it loses its vitality and its effect on conduct and character.

24. A most fundamental requirement of the libertarian model is that the media must be completely free from government controls or interference. Another is the idea that it is the duty of the press to prevent government from over stepping its bounds. In the words of Jefferson, it must provide a check on government which no other institution can provide. It must thus be a political institution and a political actor in its own right but one which must regard government as an adversary, essentially an evil force, which will do evil unless there is a watchdog acting on behalf of the people. Unfortunately or otherwise, the libertarians do not say who is to watch the watchdog, beyond saying that it must not be the government.

25. The advocacy of the media as an extra legal check on the government, the call for an adversarial relationship with regard to authority, is understandable on the part of libertarians in an age of authoritarianism. For centuries liberalism had to struggle against authoritarianism. The established government was its greatest enemy. Is it always so today?

26. There are many things wrong with the libertarian model. First, it must be quite clear that man is as much an irrational animal as a rational one. It may sound patronising but it is true: the discerning of truth from untruth is a most difficult task for the ordinary man. Even the wisest of men have often consistently been led up the garden path. The idea that man spends most of his time, much of his time or even some of his time in the relentless search for truth is absolute and silly nonsense. Just ask yourself how many truth-seeking members of the very educated British public buy the News of the World or the People every Sunday in comparison to those who buy the relatively small circulation Sunday Times or Observer. How many truth-hungry Britishers daily buy the Sun and how many buy the Guardian?

27. Second, is it right that truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, must always be told, at all times? Every society known to man in every era of man has distinguished between the lie and the white lie. History is littered with examples where it was justified not to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

28. Third, the libertarian model in its unremitting advocacy of the adversarial role may be justified in the case of an authoritarian or Communist or evil government. Is it as essential in the case of a democratic government, a libertarian government, a good government? The basic assumption that government must always be corrupt and evil is also absolute and silly nonsense.

29. Fourth, if it is assumed that power tends to corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely, by what magical formula is the media itself, with all its awesome power, exempt from this inexorable tendency? Is power the only cause of corruption? Freedom too can corrupt and absolute freedom can corrupt absolutely.

30. Fifth, the libertarian assumption of a free marketplace of ideas where there is a multiplicity of voices, where each individual has a chance to have his say, can exist only in the realm of theory. In practice, say in the West, since when has there been a multiplicity of views on the Arabs for example? For decades, the multiplicity of voices have all said the same thing about the Arabs. The picture of the one way distortion of truth is not a pretty one. At no time in history and in no country has the ideal been actualised. Some men have a greater ability to express their views than others. How many newspapers have given space to the views of the idiot and the imbecile? How many Communists or exploitative capitalists are today on the staff of the major newspapers of the world? By comparison how many members of the public have access to the means of mass communication? Indeed even Presidents and Prime Ministers are denied the right to defend themselves from insinuations by mass circulation publications.

31. The question has to be asked: is freedom of the Press often no more than the right of one man, the editor, and several men, the sub-editors and journalists, to express his or their views and prejudices? Since when has the American editor of a mid Western weekly magazine had a say equal to the American editor of a national magazine? How many American cities can today boast of more than one newspaper? The concentration of media even in the United States, the haven of the libertarian model, have concentrated power in the hands of a select few. It is quite clear that the libertarian theorists have never faced squarely the problem of financial wealth and economic support of the mass media and the fact of the silent majority. For those whose voice will never be heard, freedom of the Press does not exist. They are denied the same right of expression as is denied by a governmentcontrolled Press.

32. Sixth, the libertarian model is based on the childlike assumption that the media will generally if not always adhere to ethical practices and aspire to the public good. William Peter Hamilton, once publisher of the powerful Wall Street Journal, is on record as saying: 'A newspaper is a private enterprise owing nothing whatsoever to the public, which grants it no franchise. It is therefore affected with no public interest. It is emphatically the property of the owner, who is selling a manufactured product at his own risk.' Not many respected publishers today will openly say this or mean it. But there are hordes of media owners and practitioners whose sense of responsibility to the public good is, to say the least, somewhat limited. How else can we explain the libertarian film

industry of the West? How many socially contributing films are made in the West today in comparison with the number feasting on pornography and violence?

33. How many truth seeking newspapers and television stations will go into print or on the air with scattered bits of information in the knowledge that they are not in possession of the facts, still less all the facts, simply to beat their competitors? And for what? For the good of the individual, man and society?

34. The Press is not an institution created in heaven, naturally bestowed with virtue. It is not the unique kingdom of the virtuous. It is made up of and run by men who are moved, like other men, not only by high ideals, but also by base needs and feelings. The ability of the journalist to influence the course of events is out of all proportion to his individual right as a citizen of a democratic society. He is neither especially chosen for his moral superiority nor elected to his post. A Free Press is as prone to corruption as are the other institutions of Democracy. Is this then to be the only institution of Democracy to be completely unfettered?

35. One can go on and on. But let me rest by citing one last basic flaw of the libertarian model: its assumption of societal stability. For a society precariously balanced on the razor's edge, where one false or even true word can lead to calamity, it is criminal irresponsibility to allow for that one word to be uttered. It can be no surprise that it was in the United States itself that the doctrine of 'clear and present danger' was formulated.

36. Comparatively few countries in today's world are ultra stable states where full, free and utter licence can be allowed to run riot. Even in these ultra stable states such licence has not been allowed. There is and has never been such a thing as absolute freedom. It is my view that regardless of circumstance or time, the best model is the social responsibility model.

37. Its basic assertions are simple. The individual has rights. So too does society. Whereas the authoritarian and the Communist will boldly say that the rights of society must take precedence over the rights of the individual, and the libertarian will take the equally rigid view that the rights of the individual must override that of society, I believe that it is a question of qualitatively and quantitatively balancing the two rights.

38. Who is to decide on the balancing of the two rights? In a democratic state with a democratically elected government, it is the task of the democratically elected government.

39. Under the social responsibility system, the media does have an important role to play and must be allowed much leeway to play this role, including to criticise authority. I am reminded of an article I wrote in July 1981. Please allow me to quote. 'By and large, the role of the Press in ensuring good democratic practices and hence sustaining democracy itself is not only right but also truly indispensable. It is indeed a means of communication between a democratic government and the people. Through it not only will the people be kept informed of all that the government and its leaders are doing, but the leaders too will learn of the attitudes, needs and problems of the people. A responsible democratic government must accordingly regard a free press as an asset which facilitates good government'.

40. There are no two ways about it. The media must be given freedom. But this freedom must be exercised with responsibility. It must be given the freedom to express opinion freely, even the right to be wrong; but it must do so without prejudice and without malice. Just as in a democratic society no person or institution has a right to destroy society or to destroy democracy, the media too has no such right. An irresponsible Press is a negation of the right of the people in a democratic society. If the Press fails to understand this, then it should be made to do so by the people through their elected representatives. To put it in another way, so long as the Press is conscious of itself being a potential threat to democracy and conscientiously limits the exercise of its rights, it should be allowed to function without government interference. But when the Press obviously abuses its rights, then democratic governments have a duty to put it to right.

41. In representing the inevitably selected views of various groups of people and in pressing its own views, in pursuit of its perceptions of the public good, on those occasions when it is involved in the pursuit of the public good, the media must act with the humility that it demands of those in power. Just as it is right in saying that a government has no monopoly on constructiveness and wisdom, the media must recognise that it too has no monopoly on constructiveness and wisdom. Just as the public servant must be prepared to accept criticism, so too must the media be prepared to accept criticism. Just as Government is not above the law, the media too is not above the law. It simply will not do if a public servant is subject to the laws on state secrets but in the name of freedom others are not. Just as the media is not to be made subservient to the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, in the same way and to the same extent the executive, the legislature and the judiciary are not to be made subservient to the media. Just as the Government cannot be allowed to have the freedom to do exactly as it pleases in society, so too the media cannot be allowed to do exactly as it pleases in society.

42. The media must be allowed to compete in the economic marketplace and curry the favour of its target customers, but it must do so within the bounds of decency and responsibility. Contrary to what is thought in many of even the best journalistic institutions, the deadline is not sacred. The public good is sacred. In my view, and I state it without any reservation or apology, the public good is always sacred.

43. Ladies and gentlemen, I started off by talking of the individual and the creation of human communities. Let me end by returning to that theme. Man joined his fellow men in a group for his own purpose, in answer to his own needs. He gains safety in numbers but he loses to a certain extent his individual freedom. He was willing to do this when, in the primitive setting, he was threatened with all kinds of dangers. But the modern man has no experience of the dangers of individual isolation. He, therefore, tends to see the restraint on his individual freedom as irksome and he rebels against it. He has forgotten that there is a price to pay in order to get all those things that society provides him. It is the lack of understanding and appreciation of the limits of individual independence in society that has resulted in the instability of human societies in many parts of the world. There is a need to be educated on the structure and obligations of society, especially now, when the growth of human societies is so rapid, and complex. The media needs to educate and itself to be educated with the rest of society, especially since its reach is so vast and its power so great.

44. Now let us see how this little speech of mine is treated by the media.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

45. I now have much pleasure in declaring open this World Press Convention. Thank you.