

REIGN OF TERROR ?

Address by

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The publishing and broadcasting businesses today are facing greater attack, greater examination, and greater challenge than ever before. My remarks are entitled "Reign of Terror?" -- with a question mark -- in relation to actions against the media, and I hope to try to answer this question mark in my comments.

I saw a fascinating survey the other day indicating that today more people are critical of the media than ever before while simultaneously more people have greater belief in and put greater reliance on the media today than ever before. And I think I understand this seeming conflict. With the incredibly complex, fast-moving, electronic McLuhan age in which we live, we become ever more dependent upon our newspapers, magazines, radio and television to tell us what is happening. So much is happening, in fact, that there is a veritable information explosion going on.

With greater dependence there naturally is greater expectation and demand, and hence greater critical evaluation of what is reported, analyzed and commented upon. But in an age of increasing skepticism if not cynicism, our readers and listeners and viewers are getting the best Gutenberg and electronic delivery of information the world has ever had. And they know that despite a fully legitimate demand for the media to improve, it still is for the most part a free, fiercely independent, honest and fair means of getting information on what's happening. Sir William Hailey, former Editor of the London Times and former Director General of the BBC, has said journalism "is the life-blood of democracy. Without free, full and uncontaminated information on all things that matter, the people have no sound means of making choices and deciding."

The job of the media is to present reality whether we like that reality or not. And on balance it's doing a damn good job -- a job which must be improved but which is providing citizens with the knowledge and background they must have so they can make intelligent and informed political, economic and social choices.

But there are danger signs. Many people don't like to hear about reality. It's a sad fact that most of us prefer illusion to truth. A survey in the United States taken after the My Lai massacre by U.S. troops showed the American public was not so much upset about the massacre itself as it was about the media reporting the massacre.

- The survey indicated what I suppose is the obvious fact, that people just don't like to read and hear this kind of bad news. And in many such cases there is a tendency for the public and for government officials to blame the media for transferring the bad news. It's known as the "Cleopatra Syndrome" -- kill the messenger, not the message.

But to seek public or government favour by presenting only the news the public or officials want to hear is to fail as a journalist in a democracy. And also there are sometimes actions by officials which seek to promote illusion rather than reality or to seek to conduct public business in private.

Too often we see city or town councils or school boards discussing public business in closed meetings; or provincial or federal government agencies stamping "secret" too frequently on documents and statements of public concern; and other official actions to suppress what might be embarrassing material or undertaking efforts to distort reality.

We in the journalistic business are not in the business of winning popularity contests. We are not jugglers, dancers, ventriloquists, singers or actors seeking the audience applause. It is not really our job to please the public, officials, or anyone except Diogenes.

As I say, there are some danger signs as to the media's ability to report reality -- signs all around the world. This is especially true in the area of television, and I suppose that's because television incontestably has the greatest impact of any form of mass communication, and thus is the principal target of attack of those who want to shape reality in their image.

In some nations there is in fact a reign of terror against the media. Evidence of this can be seen in some political attitudes and efforts in the United Kingdom, in increasing efforts in many countries to censor news, to withhold bad news, and this is especially true in developing nations which may have no tradition of the terrible importance of free communication. And in countries such as Rhodesia where a CBC freelance reporter, Peter Niesewand, was arrested for simply being an honest and courageous reporter who has contributed many significant reports to CBC News and Current Affairs programs. He has been sentenced to two years hard labor for reporting the facts -- admittedly facts that the government did not like, but facts nevertheless.

Or look at the United States: In my personal opinion there too is a reign of terror -- a deliberate governmental effort to inhibit the journalistic independence of reporters, editors, newspapers and, most of all, television journalists. All governments, including the Canadian government, want the media to provide favorable coverage -- to applaud the government's efforts. That's a normal, natural desire. But Washington has certainly gone a lot further than Ottawa in trying to bring the media to heel. There was at first the official charge about distortion and manipulation of the news by an eastern effete elite -- charges designed to cater to and stimulate the natural suspicion of the eastern establishment in the south and west of the United States. There has been a continuing drumbeat of effort by Washington spokesmen to erode the credibility of the media and more particularly media which dared to present the view of those who oppose government policy as well as those who support it. The objective is to stifle embarrassing investigative reportage -- to threaten official retaliatory harassment and, it seems, to encourage fawning, pallid news reporting.

Nowhere has this been more blatant, more dangerous and more frightening than in television. The public broadcasting system in the United States is a good example. There have been some highly stimulating, provocative, thought-provoking programs on U.S. public television, looking at controversial social, political and economic issues. This disturbed the government because it meant inevitably that public funds were being spent to air programs which included criticism of government policies as well as support for those policies.

In France, that problem used to be solved by the simple expediency of the deGaulle government refusing to allow any serious criticism of its policies to be heard on French television. But apparently that approach was felt to be too obvious in Washington so the Administration decreed that not one cent of federal money financing public television was to be spent in controversial programming. And this is exactly what is happening -- those public affairs and news programs which were looking at controversial issues have been ordered off the air, and the whole organizational structure of public broadcasting has been changed to be sure that those running the business are more attuned to Administration policies. And incidentally this is not just aimed at liberal or left-wing criticism of government policies, but at right-wing criticism too. For instance, Bill Buckley will lose his television program, unless it can be financed in some other way.

The result of all this probably will be a pallid, pabulum programming diet in place of what might have been.

And in the area of private network broadcasting in the United States the reign of terror is no less obvious although the private networks have more successfully resisted it. There has been encouragement by government officials for advertisers not to sponsor controversial documentaries, public affairs programming or news programs and there has been official denunciation of reporters analyzing what the President has said shortly after he says it, even though a transcript of his comments may have been available to the reporters hours earlier.

Recently a White House aide coupled new television and radio licence renewals with a warning to the individual stations that they must be responsible for what he called "correcting" the bias of network news from CBS, NBC, and ABC. And it was suggested that individual stations could get a longer licence renewal if they demonstrated their "correcting" of network news through their own local programming. Quite naturally, the networks cried out that this was a blackmail attempt; a bribe to stations, and an effort to drive a wedge between the individual stations and the networks.

To use a White House phrase, the objective of all this effort is to prevent "ideological plugola" and "elitist gossip" on United States network news and public affairs programs. God knows the Americans have little enough controversial public affairs and news programming now compared to what we have in Canada and now with public television in the U.S. castrated in this area, with networks constantly having to look nervously over their shoulders, inevitably there is going to be less public discussion and airing about public issues in the media.

They say "it can't happen here" and I don't think it can. I think our governmental system surely would prevent any such effort to stifle public debate of controversial issues in the media. Surely we have too vigilant a public and parliament. And we have in the broadcasting area the tradition of public responsibility in the CBC which, to a lesser degree, but still to some degree, also is reflected in Canadian private broadcasting, to allow such a reign of terror to happen here.

Surely we in Canada have too much respect for our freedom to follow the stultifying path of some of those in the United States or Rhodesia or other countries where there is a stifling of the media.

One reason why I think it can't happen here is demonstrated in the outcry that followed revelation of the reported deal between the police chiefs in Canada and the Canadian Association of Broadcasters. The agreement between the two groups -- which I am sure was undertaken certainly not in malice although possibly in naivete -- was greeted with great agitation and dire warnings about freedom of the press.

To a degree the reaction was overly dramatic, given what was agreed to. Nevertheless it is a dangerous action to start down that route -- dangerous for the public because the medium is not just another arm of the law and is not a police agent. Of course you cooperate with the police and with authorities in general, but on terms which protect the most precious right of the public's right to know.

The principle of responsible reporting precludes action contrary to the public interest and contrary to the law of the country. But such principles cannot be extended to prevent the reporting of matters which might, on occasion, be construed by police or other authorities as being damaging to them, but knowledge of which might very well be in the public interest.

Certainly the press seeks no "divine right" for itself but I resolutely believe there is a right of the public in a democratic society to have knowledge of significant events affecting their welfare.

In my own judgment there must in fact be more investigative reportage, more uncovering of wrong-doing if it exists. This is one area in which I want very much our own CBC News and Current Affairs areas to expand their effort, and I think it should be expanded in the media in general.

And to do that means seeking out sources of information which are reluctant to talk because of fear of reprisal.

Unless people are willing to privately convey information of wrong-doing the public's awareness of what's really happening will be sharply limited. Those sources must have confidence that they will be protected. Without such protection against being exposed, the information will not be forthcoming and the public will be less well informed than it could be -- than it should be.

That's why personally I strongly favor some protection of sources of such information. As I said, it's not giving a "divine right" to the reporter as has been suggested, it is simply ensuring the public that it will have a better opportunity to know what is going on and thus be better informed in making choices and judgments about issues and people.

There has been an increasing demand of late by police and authorities both in Canada and in other countries to demand as evidence in a case not just the news story that is printed or the television story that is aired, but what we in television call "The outs", and what

really amounts to a reporter's notes taken during an interview or event. I think it is highly improper if authorities demand the "outs" or reporter's notes for what really amounts to fishing expeditions.

Such action seeks to make the journalist in fact an investigative agent of the police department or government or courts, and I think it is fundamentally wrong to put the journalist in the role of a policeman. Such action has an inhibiting effect and indeed a chilling effect on reporters' ability to gather and report the news because it lays open to revelation and reprisal confidential sources of information.

And finally, demands for reporters' notes and television "outs" open the door to intimidation of reporters and producers who should be concerned solely with providing the public with the pertinent facts of a given situation and not have to worry about the police, the government, or the courts forever looking over their shoulders at their notes of film "outs", often in a totally different context from the time of the event.

These points are more in the nature of a philosophical argument than a legal argument for I recognize the present law of the land could make the journalist into, in effect, a policeman. But I think implementation of this legal situation can and does have a dangerous impact on the public's right to know. Certainly in no way should we inhibit the pursuit of justice, but in many, if not most, instances of this kind, justice, I think, is better served by preservation of the privacy of the news media and the public's right to know.

I don't think, incidentally, that the two points of view are necessarily irrevocably irreconcilable. Few journalists would demand a total protection of all confidential information when it comes, for instance, to national security or knowledge of an impending murder or other crime. It seems to me there is a meeting place here between the authorities and the media even under the existing law.

There could, for instance, be much more careful examination of the implications involved by the courts or police or other bodies demanding such confidential information. For that matter when an official judgment is made that the information must be presented, the journalist could have the option of martyrdom or being able to provide the information in private rather than at a public hearing.

I am delighted to see, incidentally, legislation that has been proposed on this question by both Gordon Fairweather, P.C. from Fundy Royal, and Arnold Peters, N.D.P. M.P. from Temiskaming. At the very least, I hope their proposals stimulate public debate on this issue. That's what's happening now in the United States where something like 59 bills have been introduced in the U.S. Congress to protect the public's right to know by protecting a reporter's confidential sources of information. Eighteen U.S. States, Sweden and Austria, and perhaps a few other countries now have such protective legislation.

It's also interesting to note on this matter that the President of the New York State Trial Lawyers' Association said the other day that such protection is vital to democracy. He said it is of more benefit to society than the protections provided in the physician-patient, clergyman-parishioner, or attorney-client relationship.

Journalists always have had a long and hard and sometimes bloody struggle to have the right to report what's happening. When John Wilks began to report Parliament for the general public, the House of Commons in 1762 declared this was a breach of privilege and sought to prevent the public from knowing what was going on. That kind of Cro-Magnon idea of public interest being best served by the public not knowing what is happening has of course been largely overcome, although even today there are some officials who have a nostalgic lingering for protecting the public from being exposed or even brutalized by knowing what's going on.

The Romans used to ask "Who watches the watchman?" Today many critics of the media are asking, "Who edits the editors?" They're asking by what right does the press, radio or television choose what people should and should not read, hear and see. Well, the only right I can think of is the public's right to read, hear and see whatever news it wants to. I suppose it's simply called competition in the marketplace. If you don't like the Toronto Star, you can read the Globe and Mail or the Sun. If you don't like the CBC, you can look at CTV or CHCH or any of the many other TV options you have. If the editors and producers are not delivering a respected, desired product, the public will turn away. It's the same as in any business offering a product to the public.

So basically there is no "right" of the press to decide what the public wants -- it's the public's free choice to accept or reject what they read, hear or see.

In the electronic business our editorial franchise is up for renewal every second of every day because it takes only a split-second to switch over to some other channel.

I think in Canada today there is not the kind of blatant effort to stifle the public's right to know that there may be in some other countries, and there is no reign of terror. But there is in Canada a different, and, I think, constructive kind of pressure.

For instance, in the last federal election the political parties examined television reportage more intensively and more exhaustively than ever before in Canadian history. They microscopically examined not just the minutes and seconds of our news and information reports and commentaries, but evaluated the quality of individual reporters covering the politicians, and complained if one opponent had in their judgment a better reporter with him; and the politicians went beyond this in their rather sophisticated study of television reportage by judging the production of each news item including the crowd reaction shots, who got close-up shots, what section of a speech was shown, and what reaction items were used.

Clearly the politicians, in doing this, were paying television an enormous compliment because they know the impact and the effectiveness of television.

Even given this intensive political concern about what we are doing, it seems to me that there is relatively less pressure from the politicians these days and relatively more from the public, and to my mind that's an extraordinarily healthy thing in Canada. We want the media -- and I want the CBC -- to be much more responsive to the needs of the public. We must listen to the public more than ever before because what is being said is terribly important. But at the same time the editors and producers must make the ultimate judgments of what they put on the air or print. Somebody has to make the final judgment about what will go into the newspaper or on a newscast or TV program, and what will not, but such judgments should be made with acute sensitivity to what the public is saying.

I want to emphasize particularly here that there is a critical difference between officially inspired efforts to suppress, harass and threaten the media, and representations made by citizens' groups. The latter I would call an exercise in "people power" which is a constructive, healthy, invaluable way of seeking to present a point of view -- to get a hearing. This has a stimulating effect on the public's right to know; the other has a stifling effect.

And in a public broadcasting system such as the CBC there not only is a very considerable value in programmers hearing representations of such "people power" groups presenting a point of view, but since every taxpayer is a share-holder in the CBC they have

a right to be heard. And in fact that's one reason why the CBC has so very much more programming in the public interest than private stations.

A fundamental function of a public broadcasting system in Canada must be to inform and enlighten, and often through controversial programming. Inevitably this leads to more questioning by the audience which is perfectly natural, since the more a society knows about what's happening to itself, it automatically follows that it will question more and complain more. And, as I've said, that surely is a sign of a healthy democracy.

Certainly we offend politicians from time to time, of different and opposite kinds. Our programs sometimes offend moralists of different and opposite kinds. We are criticized for being subversive and criticized for truckling to the establishment; we are criticized for being lewdly permissive and criticized for having lost our nerve in submitting to the prudish.

Clearly politicians want more deferential treatment; moralists want their own views confirmed; business and labour want our programs to reflect their point of view; citizens' groups want their philosophy to dominate; and even various sexual groups want their concept of society supported on the CBC.

I remember a while back in Toronto the CBC carried a rather poignant documentary called "Nothing to Hide", about a

homosexual couple. We anguished quite a bit about putting this program on the air because it was not a blatant attack on the question of homosexuality nor was it supportive -- it was in fact a sensitive study without histrionics. We had anticipated that we might hear a good deal of outcry, particularly from the non-metropolitan areas of the country. Frankly, to my astonishment and to that of my colleagues, there was a big outcry but it came from the homosexual community which felt that the program did not project the situation with sufficient sympathy. In fact, my office was picketed by the sado-masochist wing of the Toronto Homophile Society -- and that's a pretty exotic picket line to go through.

But it is, after all, impossible to accept or reject an idea, whether it be on homosexuality or politics, unless you understand it. And a key function of CBC television and journalism in general is to help you understand it.

You have to face the changes in society before you can really begin to cope with them, and you must look at things as they really are rather than as you would like to think they are. The media must help us take off the rose-tinted spectacles of self-deception.

And for television especially it is essential that we not let our programming become solely a purveyor of some kind of plastic, vicarious version of life.

Public broadcasting is playing and will play a growing key role in building the future of Canada. As a matter of fact, I think that because of geography, because of economic pulls, because of cultural inflows, the future shape and indeed survival of Canada depends

to a large degree on the kind of public television service presented to Canadians.

I believe the public system is an east-west spinal column for this country in information and culture.

Television has become the foremost instrument of journalism today. More people -- more Canadians -- get more information about what's happening from television than from any other source of information. And the surveys show that people put more reliance on television than on any other form of mass communication. I know that fact is not enthusiastically endorsed by our print brethren, and I know you have to be careful with surveys and public opinion polls.

In any event, television is playing the most important role in informing Canadian society today.

Canadians today have about 50 hours of leisure time per week, and they spend more than half of that leisure time watching a television set. That means 25 to 26 hours a week are spent by Canadians watching television. And that puts enormous power and enormous responsibility into the hands of the television programmers.

Children's programming, for instance, is a vital responsibility for us since by the time an average child is 18, he or she has spent

something like 20,000 hours in front of a television set. And that's a lot of suckling on the electronic nipple, and more time than is spent in school or church or any other cultural activity. That kind of influence clearly is incalculable, and so therefore is the responsibility for those who program.

And similar responsibility lies in all our programs designed to inform Canadians about contemporary society.

All this means that the television journalist has a very heavy responsibility. For instance I firmly believe the man who is Chief News Editor of the CBC and in charge of, among other things, the CBC National News at 11 o'clock, is beyond question the most important editor in Canada today. He is speaking to well over two million Canadians every night.

Because television is the most effective means of mass communication man has ever devised it, along with radio and the print medium, must be protected against any possible reign of terror designed to castrate its honesty, its investigative revelations and its portrayal of society as it really is. At the same time, television itself, just like newspapers, must make certain the medium is used to improve society and not cater to its lowest instincts. Television must never be allowed to become merely chewing gum for the eyes, or an electronic comic book. Television must stretch the mind, not dull the mind. And this, of course, is especially and primarily true for a public broadcasting system, and it is why the CBC devotes so much air time to this kind of programming such as The Tenth Decade, or Images of Canada,

or portraits of George Bernard Shaw or Tennessee Williams. Or in new programming we are planning on Pierre Berton's book "The National Dream" on building the CPR and opening the Canadian West; or the film memoirs of the late Prime Minister Lester Pearson; or "The Days Before Yesterday" chronicling Canada from 1897 to 1957; and many other programs.

Canadians are watching this kind of Canadian programming -- and watching it in the millions. We do have in Canada performers, producers, editors, reporters and technicians who have the talent to deliver massively popular programs and responsible programs.

H.G. Wells once said that "human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe".

The media are in the forefront of this race to provide the education, and as a simple, basic principle we must believe that on the whole knowledge is preferable to ignorance, and education preferable to catastrophe.

To answer the question raised in the title of my comments: Yes, there is a reign of terror against the media, against the public's right to know, in many parts of the world including our southern neighbors. But in Canada, I think -- I trust -- I hope -- "it can't happen here."

Thank you.