

# THE MEDIA AND THE COMMON GOOD

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## I.

America's news media are in a crisis. It is a longterm crisis of transition and change, gradually unfolding and bound to continue for years. Its outcome is unpredictable, but it will extend very widely and go very deep, not just in the news business but in the larger society as well. Far-reaching alterations in the way Americans receive the news and in the kind of news they receive have already occurred, are occurring now, and will continue to occur. This has profound implications for the common good.

A number of factors have come together to produce this complex crisis. Technological change is one. But be aware that technology's impact on the news media is hardly new. Daily newspapers lost their monopoly as news sources eighty years ago when radio arrived on the scene. Three decades later, television killed off afternoon dailies once and for all. That ushered in a golden age for network TV news—the era of Huntley and Brinkley and Walter Cronkite, which lasted another thirty years. But then network news was greatly diminished in its turn by the rise of cable television.

Now all of the established news media must cope with the implications of the Internet's spectacular rise as a medium for the dissemination of information and opinions, lately including the phenomenal growth of weblogs or blogs. Print media have pretty well abandoned any thought of resisting this latest revolution and are scrambling to find ways of joining it.

Paralleling and to some extent arising from technological change are changes in public tastes and expectations about news and those who report it. Over the years, circulation figures have reflected a sharp decline in the popularity of newspapers and magazines as information sources, while the polls have registered a significant drop in their credibility. National Opinion Research Center statistics show public confidence in the press declining from around 85% in 1973 to 59% in 2002.

Television news formerly stood highest in public esteem, but the audience for the network evening news has fallen sharply of late. Meanwhile, daily readership of newspapers declined from 52.6% of adults in 1990 to 37.5% in 2000, with the drop even steeper among people between the ages of twenty and forty-nine. When speaking about news, it may no longer be realistic to speak of a truly dominant medium in the United States. Many Americans now apparently learn about the world from a hodgepodge of sources that include talk radio, Internet blogs, and cable channels. Objectivity and balance are not the values most highly cherished in these places.

When it comes to news content, Americans appear to have a strong preference for local news. In fact, the more local, the better. National news and especially foreign news command waning interest. The result is an audience-driven shift toward the local, together with a progressive dumbing-down in both content and manner of presentation, also presumably dictated by judgments of what people want.

The giant Gannett organization, whose ninety newspapers include *USA Today*, lately has been experimenting with a new approach in an effort to address the trends in technology and audience tastes. One account describes it like this: "The chain's papers are redirecting their newsrooms on the Web first, paper second. Papers are slashing national and foreign coverage and beefing up 'hyper-

local,' street-by-street news."<sup>1</sup>

People you might call parajournalists scour the local community in cars equipped with laptop computers, digital audio recorders, and digital still and video cameras, which they use to cover things like chamber of commerce events. They post the results directly on their paper's website, without benefit of editing. Readers also are invited to post things like photos of their children with Santa Claus. I probably betray my own bias in saying that if this is where the American newspaper is headed, you can cancel my subscription now.

Another aspect of the present crisis is an ongoing debate in the news business, and specifically in the newspaper world, about the merits of public ownership vs. private ownership. Advocates of private ownership see it as the best way to escape the tyranny of the bottom line, with quality sacrificed for the sake of maximizing profits and keeping stockholders happy. At present, private ownership appears to be winning the argument. Says one writer: "What newspapers really need, above all else, is ownership that values journalism and understands that the work of gathering, writing, and publishing the news is an inherently inefficient business that is in a period of profound transition. The private press baron of the past might have been a blowhard propagandist with the ethics of a wharf rat, but at least he loved the trade."<sup>2</sup>

"Private ownership is the flavor of the moment," says media critic Howard Kurtz in a piece on the ups and downs of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. But private ownership is not a panacea, he adds. Kurtz quotes the *Inquirer's* owner as saying, "We don't need a Jerusalem bureau. What we need are more people in the South Jersey bureau."<sup>3</sup> That may be perfectly true where South Jersey is concerned, but it does not bode well for the paper's Jerusalem coverage. In this matter the *Inquirer* hardly stands alone. Moreover, there are obvious problems with private ownership by private equity groups whose main interest is short-term profits.

Along with changes in the way they report news, in what news they report, and in patterns of ownership, traditional news media are cutting back. Over and over again, bureaus in other countries or other parts of the United States have been eliminated. There is much more reliance on wire services, stringers, and a variety of canned reports than there used to be. Significant reductions in editorial staff have occurred, with daily newspapers again providing striking illustrations.

Even giants like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal* have been affected. As this paper was being written, it was announced that Time Inc. was laying off more than 250 people at its magazines, including the flagship periodical, *Time*. Over the previous five years, the editorial staff of *The Los Angeles Times* was reduced from 1,200 to 940. When the newspaper's owner, the Tribune Company of Chicago, ordered further cuts last September, the publisher and editor objected and were forced out. Significantly, the daily circulation of *The Los*

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<sup>1</sup> "A Newspaper Chain Sees Its Future, And It's Online and Hyper-Local," *The Washington Post*, December 4, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas McCollam, "A Way Out?", *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February 2006.

<sup>3</sup> "At the Inquirer; Shrink Globally, Slash Locally?", *The Washington Post*,

*Angeles Times* has fallen from 1.2 million in 1990 to 776,000 as of the end of September in 2006.

Summing up the long litany of staff reductions and coverage cutbacks, the media writer for the online magazine *Slate* concludes: "Nothing will bring the traditional newspaper back to its post-World War II position of media dominance—color printing, not kids' pages, not expanded high school sports coverage, not service journalism, not bingo on Page One."<sup>4</sup> Making allowance for the differences, much the same might be said of traditional broadcast media. Edward R. Murrow is dead. The crisis goes on.

It seems likely that the question all this raises in many people's minds is: So what? What difference does the crisis of the news media make to anyone who doesn't work for a news organization or own stock in one? For a long time, many Americans, including many Catholics, have had a love-hate relationship with the media, with hate at least as likely as love at any particular moment. The reaction to learning that the media are in trouble, with unpredictable and possibly unhappy results ahead, may be, "Serves them right."

If so, it's a mistake. Looking for a way to make it clear what kind of mistake it is, I remembered a movie that some of you, perhaps many, have probably seen. Not *Citizen Kane*. Not *All the President's Men*. Not even *The Front Page*. The movie is that classic John Ford Western *Stagecoach*.

*Stagecoach* uses a familiar narrative device: a group of colorful characters making a perilous journey together. There's a steely-eyed cowpoke bent on revenge; a former Confederate officer, now turned gambler, who plays cards with an ace up his sleeve; a shady lady with a troubled past and a heart of gold. Best of all, in my book, is a drunken doctor played by that wonderful character actor Thomas Mitchell. Having botched one case too many, he's been run out of town and is heading west to make a fresh start.

Midway through the journey, a young, pregnant married woman, traveling to join her Cavalry officer husband, goes into labor. All eyes turn to the unshaven, hung-over doctor. He gulps, tosses away his bottle, rolls up his sleeves, and gets to work. Some time later he appears from an inner room and proudly tells his companions, "It's a boy."

Our news media are something like that doctor: flawed but indispensable in a pinch. I've written and spoken about the flaws many times, and I'll probably do that again.<sup>5</sup> But the sins of the media aren't my topic now. Now I wish to underline the obvious but sometimes overlooked fact that the crisis of the news media is a crisis for the common good of our democratic society. As such, it's a matter of immense importance for us all.

My paper has three parts. This first part is an overview of the crisis. The second part will be a quick summary of the still-evolving view of the media officially held by the Catholic Church. The third will offer some suggestions about what the Church, and we as responsible members of the Church, can do to help point the media in a positive direction.

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<sup>4</sup> Jack Shafer, "Liposuction for Newspapers," *The Washington Post*, June 25, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Russell Shaw, "The Church and the Media: Who's to Blame?" in Robert P. Lockwood, ed., *Anti-Catholicism in American Culture* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2000).

First, the crisis. A long piece on *The Philadelphia Inquirer*—written, I note, before the paper's present ownership came on board—contains a passage that deserves to be quoted not just for what it says about the *Inquirer* but about the news business in general.

It was as if a dark cloud had descended over the news business, a mood exacerbated by the journalistic inclination to see the worst in things. On the same day in September that the *Inquirer* announced its cuts, The New York Times Company said it was reducing its newsroom staff but forty-five and that of *The Boston Globe* by thirty-five. Though newspapers remained profitable, and great sources of cash, the coming of the Internet (and with it, free news and classified advertising), the declining readership among the young, and the feared migration of advertisers away from print, had left reporters and editors wondering whether they might be the ones left to turn out the lights.<sup>6</sup>

That's pretty grim stuff. But not atypical these days.

At this point a long essay about the news business published in *The New York Times Book Review* in the summer of 2005 deserves our attention.<sup>7</sup> It is the work of Judge Richard A. Posner of the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit. Judge Posner also is a lecturer at the University of Chicago Law School and an articulate man who often shares his views about issues in a variety of periodicals. This time he undertook to explain the crisis of the American news media. His analysis was not universally appreciated—some people in the news business were downright furious in fact—but its provocative mix of the astute and the wrongheaded deserves serious consideration.

"The conventional news media are embattled," Posner begins. "Attacked by both left and right in book after book, rocked by scandals, challenged by upstart bloggers, they have become a focus of controversy and concern. Their audience is in decline, their credibility with the public in shreds." But granting all that, no one can seriously doubt the central fact pertaining to the media and the common good: The essential function of these flawed but indispensable channels of communication, as Posner puts it, is "to inform people about social, political, cultural, ethical and economic issues so that they can vote and otherwise express themselves as responsible citizens." The media's problems are our problems.

One of the current problems of the news media is ideological tilt, both perceived and real. Of all journalists who consider themselves either liberal or conservative, Posner writes, fully 75% regard themselves as liberal. That is far higher than the percentage of the public who consider themselves liberals, which at the time Posner wrote two years ago stood at 35% among those with a stated political position. Studies of the media elite who staff national news organizations similarly have shown that journalists are much less religiously inclined than are Americans generally.

Summing up, Judge Posner writes:

The mainstream media are predominantly liberal—in fact, more liberal than they used to be. But not because the politics of journalists have changed. Rather, because the rise of new media, itself an economic rather than a political phenomenon, has caused polarization, pushing the already liberal media farther left.

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Shapiro, "Looking for Light," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March/April 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Richard A. Posner, "Bad News," *The New York Times Book Review*, July 31, 2005.

And if that weren't enough to send conservatives into spasms of fury, he adds: "The news media have also become more sensational, more prone to scandal and possibly less accurate."

Posner's analysis of the news business shows him to be an economic determinist. His explanation of what has happened in the media world proceeds accordingly. Thus, at the root, he attributes the rise of sensationalism, proneness to scandal, and the rest to a "vertiginous decline" in the cost of electronic communication along with a lowering of regulatory barriers to entering the field, with a resulting proliferation of consumer options. He writes:

Thirty years ago the average number of television channels that Americans could receive was seven; today, with the rise of cable and satellite television, it is 71. Thirty years ago there was no Internet, therefore no Web, hence no online newspapers and magazines, no blogs. The public's consumption of news and opinion used to be like sucking on a straw; now it's like being sprayed by a fire hose.

In this environment, news media must compete for audiences to stay alive. Competition in the news business has always been a fact of life of course; but unlike the days when it was daily newspapers warring against one another, now it is old media battling new. According to Posner, this competition has become a race to find the lowest common denominator of audience intelligence and taste, with results like political polarization and sensationalism in reporting. He leaves out the appeal to ultra-local interests noted earlier, but otherwise there is much truth in what he says.

Judge Posner is not the only one who sees this happening. A critic of Silvio Berlusconi's handling of news media in Italy says something similar: politically motivated manipulation of the news has for some time been taking place in the United States. This author writes:

Journalism has traditionally been attached to the idea that you had a right to your own opinions but not to your own facts. Objectivity may be a myth, but it is a useful myth that encourages journalists to try to maintain a sense of fairness and balance, a healthy respect for the facts, and a sense of obligation to report facts that run counter to their most cherished views.<sup>8</sup>

When the sense of obligation to the facts goes, something irreplaceable is lost.

Note that in Posner's telling of the story, the fundamental failings of the news media are at bottom not their fault. They are due to factors largely beyond the control of the media: market forces and audience frivolity and irresponsibility. While this may be overly generous to the media, it contains much truth. Posner concludes:

[I]ncreased competition has not produced a public more oriented toward public issues, more motivated and competent to engage in genuine self-government, because these are not the goods that most people are seeking from the news media. They are seeking entertainment, confirmation, reinforcement, emotional satisfaction; and what consumers want, a competitive market supplies.

Even allowing for exaggeration, that is a sobering thought.

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<sup>8</sup> Alexander Stille, "Silvio's Shadow," *Columbia Journalism Review*, September/October 2006.

Again, it is easy to find confirmation elsewhere. Consider the account by an American journalist named Andrew Lee Butters of the view of Iraq that he found operative back home a year-and-a-half after the American-led invasion:

I think a good question is how accurate a picture of Iraq Americans actually want. When I came home to the United States in fall 2004, around the time of the elections, people would ask me about Iraq at every party or event. They couldn't understand and were just very surprised to hear me say that things weren't actually going very well. Somehow they would see these explosions and just think that it's okay when things just blew up all the time.

Somehow as these bombings keep going on there was a flourishing civil society going on? A society that just ignores these things? Much responsibility is placed on the press, what they're doing and what they're not doing. But I think the American public shared a certain amount of responsibility by shutting its eyes.<sup>9</sup>

Public perceptions have changed since then. It might have been well if they had changed sooner.

Strange to say, Richard Posner concludes his analysis with a kind of rhetorical shrug. In effect, he suggests that the state of affairs he's described—polarized and sensationalized news media competing for the favor of frivolous and irresponsible audiences—doesn't matter much. After all, one result of the proliferation of media has been to provide "richer fare than ever before," including fare that caters to the tastes of the educated elite which cares about facts and wants diverse opinions. And if the tastes of elitists who make the decisions and run the country are satisfied—that's what counts, is it not?

That recalls something said eighty years ago by a quintessential establishment icon, Walter Lippmann, in a groundbreaking study of media manipulation called *Public Opinion*. Given the complexity of issues, Lippmann wrote, it had become simply too time-consuming and inconvenient for the ruling elite to educate the untutored masses in matters of fact. Still, it was necessary to preserve the forms and appearances of democracy. The solution lay in what the author called the creation of consent. Lippmann wrote:

The creation of consent is not a new art. It is a very old one which was supposed to have died out with the appearance of democracy. But it has not died out. It has, in fact, improved enormously—because it is now based on analysis rather than on rule of thumb. And so, as a result of psychological research, coupled with the modern means of communication, the practice of democracy has turned a corner. A revolution is taking place—it is no daring prophecy to say that the knowledge of how to create consent will alter every political calculation and modify every political premise.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew Lee Butters in "Into the Abyss. Reporting Iraq, 2003-2006: An Oral History," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 158. *Public Opinion* was originally

I don't know about you, but in this era of focus groups, highly sophisticated polling techniques, and spin, it makes my blood run cold. The first line of defense against the threat to the common good of democratic society that such thinking poses lies in free news media in good health.

I shall return to the media in the third section of this paper. Now I turn to the Catholic Church.

## II.

Let me begin with something Pope John Paul II said in the last public document of his pontificate. This was an Apostolic Letter called *Il Rapido Sviluppo* C The Rapid Development C addressed to "those responsible for communications" and dated January 24, 2005: the feast of Saint Francis de Sales, patron saint of journalism. Here are the opening words of the fourth section, "The Mass Media, the Crossroads of the Great Social Questions":

The Church, which in the light of the message of salvation entrusted to it by the Lord is also a teacher of humanity, recognizes the duty to offer its own contribution for a better understanding of outlooks and responsibilities connected with current developments in communications. Especially because these influence the consciences of individuals, form their mentality and determine their view of things, it is important to stress in a forceful and clear way that the mass media constitute a patrimony to safeguard and promote.<sup>11</sup>

These are beautiful sentimentsC"a patrimony to safeguard and promote." But churchmen have not always spoken that way, nor do they always speak that way about the news media now.

Not long ago I read a scholarly article on media by a Catholic academician, a man who's done good work on many subjects for many years. Unfortunately, I could only conclude that he doesn't understand the news business and its place in a free society. Having presented a conventional account of the sins of the media, he went on to suggest that perhaps a free press isn't really needed. After all, he wrote, "one can imagine a country in which the government and local administrators provide the necessary information through public announcers."<sup>12</sup>

That may have been a parenthetical, purely hypothetical remark, without endorsement of the idea. But it's unacceptable even if it's taken that way. There is no need to *imagine* a country like this. The experiment has been triedCin Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union, Mao's China, together with other totalitarian states past and present. It has not worked very well.

There is precedent in Catholic history for viewing the news media with suspicion or worse. Consider Pope Gregory XVI. In his encyclical *Mirari Vos* of 1832 he deplored the rise of "indifferentism" in religion and morality and then said:

Here we must include that harmful and never sufficiently denounced freedom to publish any writings whatever and disseminate them to people, which some dare to demand and promote with so great a clamor. We are horrified to see what monstrous doctrines and prodigious errors are disseminated far and wide in countless books, pamphlets and other writings which, though small in weight, are very great in malice. We are in tears at the abuse which proceeds from them over the face of the earth.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Il Rapido Sviluppo*, n. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Leo Elders, "Freedom of the Press vs. the Right to Privacy," *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly*, Spring 2006.

<sup>13</sup> *Mirari Vos*, n. 15 (August 15, 1832).

Blessed Pius IX in the 1864 encyclical *Quanta Cura*, which accompanied the Syllabus of Errors, echoed Pope Gregory on the dangers of freedom of expression and freedom of the press. "In these times," he wrote, "the haters of truth and justice and most bitter enemies of our religion, deceiving the people and maliciously lying, disseminate impious doctrines by means of pestilential books, pamphlets and newspapers dispersed over the whole world."<sup>14</sup>

Jacques Maritain suggests that in taking this line Pope Gregory and Pope Pius meant to reject the absolutizing of freedom of expression as an end in itself<sup>15</sup>. Maritain may be putting too benign a gloss on these texts, but certainly it is necessary to understand the historical context in which these things were said. At the time the Church in Europe was besieged by the forces of militant secularism as it was by militant anti-Catholic forces in the United States and such remarks by Church leaders reflect that state of affairs. But even so, these views now seem like relics of the past. Note that Blessed John XXIII in the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* specifically included among the human rights enumerated "a right to freedom in investigating the truth, and within the limits of the moral order and the common good to freedom of speech and publication [and] the right also to be accurately informed about public events."<sup>16</sup>

Efforts to draw a veil of secrecy over the proceedings were made at both Vatican Council I and Vatican Council II. In both cases, they failed, and the reason is instructive: at both councils some participants insisted on telling people outside what was going on. The historian Owen Chadwick says of Vatican I: "The Curia did not realize the elementary truth that an assembly of 600 to 700 people could not hide what it did if it was in any way controversial. The solemn secrecy of the Council became a sieve."<sup>17</sup> When the same thing started to happen at Vatican II, the people in charge fortunately changed direction, and the council became a relatively open affair.

During the last hundred years or so there has been an ongoing evolution in the Church's official thinking about news media. Chadwick holds that Leo XIII was the first pope to understand "that the press, even when it was Catholic, was a fourth estate, and to begin to treat it accordingly."<sup>18</sup> With ups and downs, this way of thinking gradually spread throughout the twentieth century. Pope Pius XII's grandson of the co-founder of the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* played an especially notable role. He expressed appreciation for the press, praised the service of the press to society, and, famously, even recognized the necessity of public opinion in the Church.<sup>19</sup>

As with so many other things, the great turning point was the Second Vatican Council. Its Decree on the Media of Social Communication, *Inter Mirifica*, is commonly dismissed as the weakest of its sixteen documents. Even so, in a passage addressed to civil authorities, it says "the

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<sup>14</sup> *Quanta Cura*, nn. 3,7 (December 8, 1864).

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 182.

<sup>16</sup> *Pacem in Terris*, n. 12 (1963).

<sup>17</sup> Owen Chadwick, *A History of the Popes 1830-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 206.

<sup>18</sup> Chadwick, 329.

<sup>19</sup> Pope Pius XII, address to editors of Catholic periodicals, February 17, 1950.

progress of modern society" requires "a true and just freedom of information."<sup>20</sup> It also directed that after the council a pastoral instruction on the means of social communication be prepared. This turned out to be *Communio et Progressio*, which was written by a team of experts under the supervision of the Pontifical Commission (now, Council) for Social Communications and published in 1971. I quote just a few passages, under the heading "Access to the Sources and Channels of News," that suggest the document's approach:

Modern man cannot do without information that is full, consistent, accurate and true. Without it, he cannot understand the perpetually changing world in which he lives.

Society, at all levels, requires information if it is to choose the right course. The community requires well-informed citizens. The right to information is not merely the prerogative of the individual, it is essential to the public interest.

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<sup>20</sup> Decree on the Means of Social Communication, *Inter Mirifica*, n. 12.

Those whose job it is to give the news have a most difficult and responsible role to play.<sup>21</sup>

Concerning the press and the Church, the pastoral instruction says: "Since the development of public opinion within the Church is essential, individual Catholics have the right to all the information they need to play their active role in the life of the Church. In practice this means that communications media must be available for the task."<sup>22</sup>

In November, 1971, ten months after the pastoral instruction was published, the bishops of the United States voted to open their general meetings to credentialed journalists and designated observers. They began doing that at their general meeting in Atlanta in April of 1972. To the best of my knowledge, no episcopal conference anywhere else in the world has gone as far as the American conference in opening its proceedings to the press.

This policy remains in place today. Over the last ten years, nevertheless, with no explanation given, the bishops have begun conducting more and more of their business in closed, executive sessions. At present, half or more of an ordinary business meeting of the U.S. bishops takes place this way. There may be reasons for some of this—for example, the alleged sensitivity of matters sometimes under negotiation between the bishops' conference and the Holy See—but on the whole I think the bishops now consistently err by excess.

But that is a story for another day. I close this brief sketch of news media and the Church with something the Pastoral Instruction for Social Communications says:

The modern media of social communication offer men of today a great round table. At this they are in search of, and able to participate in, a world-wide exchange of brotherhood and cooperation. It is not surprising that this should be so, for the media are at the disposal of all and are channels for that very dialogue which they themselves stimulate. The torrent of information and opinion pouring through these channels makes every man a partner in the business of the human race. This interchange creates the proper conditions for that mutual and sympathetic understanding which leads to universal progress.<sup>23</sup>

How realistic this picture is I leave to you. But even if it can never be entirely realized in this fallen world of ours, it continues to be a noble ideal that we must strive to accomplish.

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<sup>21</sup> Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication, *Communio et Progressio*, nn. 34, 35, 36 (January 29, 1971).

<sup>22</sup> *Communio et Progressio*, n. 119.

<sup>23</sup> *Communio et Progressio*, n. 19.

### III.

I return now to the news media. Flawed though they are, there is no serious question that they do serve the common good of society. As Richard Posner points out in a passage quoted earlier, the central element of this service consists in telling people what they need to know in order to act as responsible members of society.

Related to this is the role of the press as an instrument of oversight and accountability. Once more using the analytical framework of economic determinism, Posner puts it like this: "Because there is a market demand for correcting the errors and ferreting out the misdeeds of one's enemies, the media exercise an important oversight function, creating accountability and deterring wrongdoing."<sup>24</sup> That media have an important oversight function is eminently true; what is *not* true is Posner's claim, immediately following, that their "great social mission" is to disclose wrongdoing for the mere delectation of members of a public who enjoy seeing rascals get their come-uppance. That is carrying cynicism too far.

I repeat: there is much ambivalence about the news media today. It certainly exists at the upper levels of the institutional Church. Complaints about the media have been common there for years, and they may have grown in reaction to the sex abuse scandal, where, along with uncovering painful truths that needed airing, journalists were sometimes guilty of sensationalism, exaggeration, and sloppy reporting.<sup>25</sup> The response of some Church people to the crisis of the news media is likely to be, "Let them stew in their own juice."

There is a more constructive approach to be found in a series of documents published since 1989 by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications under the leadership of Archbishop John P. Foley. These documents discuss topics pornography in the media, advertising, the implications of the Internet for society and the Church, and the need to make provision for media in pastoral planning. Especially interesting for what it says about media and the common good is *Ethics in Communications*, which was issued on June 4, 2000, World Communications Day.<sup>26</sup>

*Ethics in Communications* makes the point that ethics must concern itself not only with media content but also with media process and with systemic questions of structure and control. "At least in open societies with market economies," it says, "the largest ethical question of all may be how to balance profit against service to the public interest understood according to an inclusive conception of the common good."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Posner, "Bad News."

<sup>25</sup> On this, see for example Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 59-65.

<sup>26</sup> Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Communications* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> *Ethics in Communications*, n. 20.

In relation to the common good, three points stand out in this short but fairly comprehensive document: the priority of the person; the idea of the common good; and the need for public participation in media policy-setting.

First, the priority of the person. *Ethics in Communications* identifies the fundamental relevant ethical principle as this: "The human person and the human community are the end and measure of the use of the media of social communication; communication should be by persons to persons for the integral development of persons." Integral development here signifies more than a sufficiency of material goods. Rather: "Everyone deserves the opportunity to grow and flourish in respect to the full range of physical, intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual goods. Individuals have irreducible dignity and importance, and may never be sacrificed to collective interests."<sup>28</sup>

Second, the idea of the common good. Although social communication rightly looks to the needs and interests of particular groups, the document makes the point that this does not justify disadvantaging some groups for the advantage of others. This principle operates not only within nations but also at the international level, where "the maldistribution of material goods between North and South" is said to be worsened by "a maldistribution of communication resources and information technology." In this light, decision makers have an obligation to address the needs of the most vulnerable, including the poor, the elderly and unborn, children and youth, the oppressed and marginalized, women and minorities, the sick and disabled, families, and religious groups.<sup>29</sup>

Third, the need for structured public participation in media policy setting. Here the document anticipates what is likely to be a common objection and replies to it.

Circulation, broadcast ratings, and "box office", along with market research, are sometimes said to be the best indicators of public sentiment. In fact, the only ones necessary for the law of the market to operate. No doubt the market's voice can be heard in these ways. But decisions about media content and policy should not be left only to the market and to economic factors. Profits since these cannot be counted on to safeguard either the public interest as a whole or, especially, the legitimate interests of minorities.<sup>30</sup>

These excerpts may suggest the sometimes provocative nature of a Church document that deserves more attention than it has gotten up to now.

We have been considering what news media should do. Now we need to examine another question: What should the Church do in response to the crisis in the media? Spokespersons for the Church criticize the press freely and frequently. Is there anything positive the Church can and should do in view of its own obligations to the common good?

Indeed there is.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ethics in Communications*, n. 21.

<sup>29</sup> *Ethics in Communications*, n. 22.

<sup>30</sup> *Ethics in Communications*, n. 24.

The Church cannot solve the economic problems of the media. It cannot shape the rapidly-changing technological environment to which the media must adjust. News organizations will have to work those things out for themselves. But the Church can and should do something about forming the audience for news. And, to a great extent, audiences are the key.

An economic determinist like Richard Posner is right to make the point that in a market economy much that news media do is driven by audience tastes: "providers of a service are forced to give the consumer what he or she wants." Furthermore, Posner is by no means altogether wrong in arguing that audiences for news in the United States now are contributing to the debasement of the media by demanding and getting a debased news product. As he says, only a "sliver of a sliver" of the total aggregate of viewers and listeners and readers appears willing to patronize sophisticated, diversified news coverage and commentary.

To be sure, Posner overstates his case. As an elitist, he takes a highly dismissive view of the American mass audience. But the current crisis of the news media illustrates that there is there is an unpleasantly large element of truth in what he says. Up to a point, Gresham's Law operates in the news business.

Audience education and formation are an important part of the answer. Church documents on communication often commend the idea. Here is a typical passage from *Ethics in Communications*.

Professional communicators are not the only ones with ethical duties. Audiences & recipients & have obligations, too. Communicators attempting to meet their responsibilities deserve audiences conscientious about theirs.

The first duty of recipients of social communication is to be discerning and selective. They should inform themselves about media & their structures, mode of operation, contents & and make responsible choices, according to ethically sound criteria, about what to read or watch or listen to. Today everybody needs some form of continuing media education, whether by personal study or participation in an organized program or both. More than just teaching about techniques, media education helps people form standards of good taste and truthful moral judgment, an aspect of conscience formation.

Through her schools and formation programs the Church should provide media education of this kind. Similarly, parents have a serious duty to help their children learn how to evaluate and use the media, by forming their consciences correctly and developing their critical faculties. For their children's sake, as well as their own, parents must learn and practice the skills of discerning viewers and listeners and readers, acting as models of prudent use of media in the home. Children and young people should be open to formation regarding media, resisting the easy path of uncritical passivity, peer pressure, and commercial exploitation. Families & parents and children together & will find it helpful to come together in groups to study and discuss the problems and opportunities created by social communication.<sup>31</sup>

Elsewhere in this and other Church documents one finds statements about the need for media

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<sup>31</sup> *Ethics in Communications*, n. 25.

education in seminaries, in the continuing education of priests, and even in on-the-job training for bishops.<sup>32</sup>

How widely is all this being done? It seems likely that more is said than is actually done about media education in and through the Church—the tendency to treat it as fluff or simply ignore it persists in Catholic schools and parishes. And that is a mistake. This is a media-saturated world; it behooves us to equip ourselves to deal with the world as it is.

Usually, when people refer to media education, they mean education about how to watch movies and television. Many diocesan newspapers and other Catholic periodicals meet this particular need up to a point by carrying film and TV reviews. But more is needed, and education concerning the news media should be part of it. How many Americans know much about the history of the American news media, how news is gathered, processed, and disseminated, who the people are who do this work? Whatever the number may be—and, relatively speaking, it probably isn't very great—it should be much larger than it is.

There are two overriding reasons to give children and adults media education that includes the news media. One is defensive: to protect them against exploitation and injury. This is an important purpose and, unfortunately, quite necessary today.

The other reason is positive. In a free market context, where market forces oblige media to respond to what people want, the best way to influence the media for the good in the long run is by forming intelligent, discerning audiences—readers and viewers and listeners who demand and, through the working of the market if in no other way, eventually will get excellent performance by the media.

Pope Benedict XVI makes this point in his message for the annual World Day of Social Communications, which was issued last January. Speaking specifically about media education for children, the Pope says:

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Pastoral Instruction *Aetatis Novae*, n. 28 (1992).

The relationship of children, media, and education can be considered from two perspectives: the formation of children by the media; and the formation of children to respond appropriately to the media. A kind of reciprocity emerges which points to the responsibilities of the media as an industry and to the need for active and critical participation of readers, viewers, and listeners.<sup>33</sup>

There is nothing coercive about this. In fact, it is complementary to the attitudes of conscientious news professionals themselves. As the Pontifical Council for Social Communications points out, "the vast majority of people involved in social communication in any capacity want to do the right thing."<sup>34</sup> In the news business, that means producing high-quality journalism in the service of the common good of the community as the journalists understand it. Audience pressure in that direction, rather than toward the dumbing-down now underway in many sectors of the media, would come as a welcome relief.

It is time to stop talking about media education, and undertake serious, constructive efforts to create an environment in which news people and other communicators can do the best work they are capable of. The Church cannot resolve the technological and economic challenges of the media crisis, but it can do something even more important: It can form intelligent, discerning audiences who will support excellence in the reporting and interpretation of news.

Pope Benedict says Catholic parishes and schools "should be in the forefront of media education today."<sup>35</sup> I hope they soon will.

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<sup>33</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Children and the Media: A Challenge for Education," Message for the 41<sup>st</sup> World Day of Social Communications (January 24, 2007), n. 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Ethics in Communications*, n. 4.

<sup>35</sup> "Children and the Media," n. 4.

## **Mr. Russell Shaw**

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