

856295

ADW 7402

Freedom of information

Statement
on
**FREEDOM
OF
INFORMATION**

**COMMUNICATION
COMMITTEE**

**UNITED STATES
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE**

February 14, 1973

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
LIBRARY

FEB 16 1973

COLLEGE LIBRARY
VERTICAL FILE

Statement
on
FREEDOM
OF
INFORMATION
Communication Committee
United States Catholic Conference

February 14, 1973

Freedom of the media of news and information is one of the most cherished principles of the American constitutional system.

Today, this freedom seems to be the arena in which ever louder battles are being fought. There are continued exchanges between public authorities and media spokesmen, resulting in breakdowns in the relationship between government and the media industry. Government is accused of efforts at inordinate restraint. The media are accused of prejudiced editorializing. Court rulings are said to inhibit journalists' rights of confidentiality in dealing with news sources. Reporters are blamed for interfering with the judicial process. There are charges of undue influence in broadcast news and public-affairs programming that result, on one hand, from government interference and, on the other, from media bias.

We are concerned, besides, about growing public apathy with regard to the issue of freedom of information and the consequent danger that the media may become alienated from the public.

It is a time for all in positions of public responsibility to reinforce public awareness and appreciation of the meaning and importance of the First Amendment and of the significance of the Constitution's free-press guarantee.

It is also time for the media community to take positive steps to assure the public of its continued commitment to free flow of truthful and objective information.

We do not imagine that in these brief remarks we will be able to resolve specific current controversies regarding the extent of this freedom. Our intention instead is to recall certain principles which may contribute to an effective national discussion of these matters. We do so in the conviction that unnecessary restriction of the freedom of the news media must always be as much a cause of concern as abuses in the exercise of this freedom.

It is true that freedom of the information media is not absolute. It is meant to serve the common good, and the common good must therefore be the criterion by which this freedom is evaluated in principle and practice. But precisely because a free press, exercising its freedom responsibility, is the indispensable servant of a free people, it is crucially important that the media of news and information, and the men and women who work in these media, not be subjected to undue pressure from either public or private sources.

The need for information and the role of the media in supplying it were discussed at length in the Pastoral Instruction on Communications issued in June, 1971, by the Vatican's Commission on Social Communications. What was said there is worth recalling in the context of debate over the

meaning and limits of press freedom in our country. The "right to information" is essential today both "for the individual and for society in general," the Pastoral Instruction declared. (#33) "Modern man cannot do without information that is full, consistent, accurate and true. . . . Only in this way can he assume a responsible and active role in his community and be a part of its economic, political, cultural and religious life." (#34) The right to information is "not merely the prerogative of the individual, it is essential to the public interest." (#35)

That being so, it follows that the media of news and information have a vital task. The "free flow of information and opinion" through the media is needed for citizens to "play an active part in the community." (#46) The news media must exercise their freedom responsibly, with constant concern for truth, fairness and objectivity, in light of "those real and public needs upon which the right to information is based." (#47) But the other side of this coin requires that the media have real opportunity to perform their essential role of public service.

The men and women of the news media are of course fallible human beings. Furthermore their profession requires them to work under conditions which are often less than ideal. This means that the media will sometimes make errors of fact, judgment, and emphasis. Recognizing that this is so, newsmen must make every effort to "remain faithful to the truth." (#39) They should not react either complacently or defensively to legitimate criticism. They have a serious obligation to correct their mistakes and, in particular, to make certain that all sides to disputed issues are represented fairly and given adequate attention in their presentations.

It is our belief, however, that corrective action, when required, is in general best left to the news media themselves, working in concert, and to the free operation of public opinion. Public authority does indeed have a duty to intervene in extreme circumstances in order to protect the common good. But premature or excessive intervention from public sources, including both the courts and the executive and legislative branches of government, even though well intended, can have the result of undermining legitimate freedom of the press; even the threat of such intervention could all too easily have a chilling effect on the freedom of the media.

Public authorities must also play a positive role in insuring the free flow of information by making information readily available to the public through the news media. This does not mean that public officials must disclose everything they know about every subject; in some cases this might do more harm than good. But it is equally true that public officials have a duty to explain their policies and actions to the people and, in doing so, to provide information which is "full, consistent, accurate and true." Where decisions must be made whether to disclose or withhold information, the general presumption should be in favor of disclosure.

As both society and the media become more complex and confront new problems, difficult questions arise regarding practical applications of the principle of freedom of the press and the right of the public to information. It is understandable that sincere and honorable men can disagree about these questions. The effort to resolve such disagreements should be carried out calmly and equitably through the mutual efforts of representatives of the media, the public authorities, and the public itself. Undoubt-

edly the nation would benefit from the creation of new channels and forums for collaborative discussion of these matters.

We therefore urge the media industry to initiate prompt action leading to the development of whatever voluntary programs of self-regulation and enforcement of media responsibility may be necessary for the common good. This cannot be the initiative of the public. It should not be the initiative of the government.

In the continuing dialogue on this vital national issue, however, it is imperative that all involved keep clearly in view the necessity of protecting and fostering the fullest possible degree of freedom for the media of news and information. For the freedom of the media is vital if the right to know possessed by free citizens of a free nation is to be realized today and in the years to come.



1973

Publications Office

UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

1312 Massachusetts Avenue N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20005