

**In Service of the Truth and
the Common Good:**
The Impact of Media on Global Peace and Conflict

Frank Walton
Rapporteur



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

Communications and Society Program
Charles M. Firestone
Executive Director
Washington, DC
2004

To purchase additional copies of this report, please contact:

The Aspen Institute
Publications Office
P.O. Box 222
109 Houghton Lab Lane
Queenstown, Maryland 21658
Phone: (410) 820-5326
Fax: (410) 827-9174
E-mail: publications@aspeninstitute.org

For all other inquiries, please contact:

The Aspen Institute
Communications and Society Program
One Dupont Circle, NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 736-5818
Fax: (202) 467-0790

Charles M. Firestone
Executive Director

Patricia K. Kelly
Assistant Director

Copyright © 2004 by The Aspen Institute

The Aspen Institute
One Dupont Circle, NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20036

Published in the United States of America in 2004
by The Aspen Institute

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 0-89843-412-2

04-016

1335/CSP/04-BK

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	v
FOREWORD, <i>Charles M. Firestone</i>	ix
IN SERVICE OF THE TRUTH AND THE COMMON GOOD: THE IMPACT OF MEDIA ON GLOBAL PEACE AND CONFLICT, <i>Frank Walton</i>	
Introduction	1
I. The News and the Truth.....	3
II. Journalism's Creed, Humanity's Values.....	8
III. News Coverage of Conflict	13
IV. Common Concerns	20
APPENDIX	
List of Conference Participants	29
The Communications Media at the Service of Authentic Peace in Light of <i>Pacem in Terris</i> , <i>Pope John Paul II</i>	31
Further Reading	35
About the Author	37
The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program.....	39

Executive Summary

On April 11, 1963, Pope John XXIII issued *Pacem in Terris: Encyclical on Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty*. This papal encyclical for the first time caused the church to reflect upon the impact of contemporary mass media on the welfare and peace of the world. In recognition of the fortieth anniversary of *Pacem in Terris*, the Aspen Institute convened, with support from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, a distinguished group of religious leaders from several faiths, media organization executives, and prominent journalists at the Aspen Institute's Aspen Wye River Conference Centers to reflect on the impact of media today, in the twenty-first century, on peace in our world.

Planned and convened as the U.S. led invasion and occupation of Iraq unfolded, the conference examined the ways in which news media affect—and are affected by—peace and conflict in the world. Sometimes the role is intentional, as in the well-documented cases of deliberately false reporting to provoke violence in Bosnia and Rwanda. More often, however, the news media's impact on peace and conflict comes as a result of covering the words and actions of other powerful individuals and institutions in society.

In Service of Truth and the Common Good is the report of the Aspen Institute Roundtable on the Impact of Media on Global Peace and Conflict. This report illuminates the complexities that are inherent in the practice of journalism, particularly as they relate to global affairs and matters of war and peace. These include examinations of the following:

- The news and the truth, including the difficulty in identifying and conveying through news reporting what is factually true and what is “the Truth;”
- How journalism's unwritten creed—that is, the professional standards and values that guide the work of journalists—can be influenced by the personal subjectivity that all human beings bring to their viewing and interpretation of events;
- News coverage of conflict; and
- Areas of common concern to journalists, religious and other societal leaders.

The News and the Truth

Conference participants discussed the various ways in which today's media convey, usually successfully, the “small t” truths (i.e., accurate descriptions of persons, places, events) as well as “capital T” Truth (in the Platonic sense of the ultimate ideal of a singular, knowable truth). Various limitations of technology and news-producing organizations were cited to illustrate that an individual journalist's reporting could be the true, but not be the only truth. Any one instance of news reporting is partial—and subjective. Recognizing this, the conference participants discussed how the policies of news organizations to present “both sides” of a story could at times be an aid to fuller understanding, but also at other times be a distortion of an issue into false polarities. The group held an implicit belief that many media voices, a free market of news, is the best guarantee that the public can get the Truth. However, even that free media marketplace must be governed by a set of standards and principles.

Journalism's Creed, Humanity's Values

With the practicing journalists and the media executives taking the lead in this part of the discussion, the group identified a set of implicit fundamentals for journalism's creed. Good journalism is accurate, fair, balanced, interesting, educational, relevant, restrained, and contextualized. While there was strong consensus about these attributes, there was also recognition of the personal character and subjectivity of all of the attributes in practice; in the field the journalist himself or herself is the judge of whether the reporting meets the standards. Journalism's creed is variously applied by the large corporate organizations that maintain news making operations, as well as by the lonely journalist out in the field, often in adverse, threatening and uncertain circumstances.

News Coverage of Conflict

The conference participants restated the commonplace, but always disconcerting truism, that bad news is good news. The group also recognized with some discomfort that U.S. media coverage in the world follows closely U.S. national interests—a natural or human-created disaster in one part of the world is more or less “interesting” to the U.S. news media depending on how closely that country's interests are inter-

twined with those of the United States. Journalists expressed frustration at the inability of their news organizations to cover comprehensively a wide variety of important issues across the globe because of the constraints of limited organizational resources. Participants also acknowledged the quandary that journalists face when they feel conflicting demands among concerns for human compassion for victims of conflict, their own personal and their organization's patriotism, and a search for an objective and dispassionate reporting and understanding of a nation or force in conflict with U.S. policy and action. Conference participants echoed the opinions of many urgent and current writings on the function and utility of media coverage and artistic representations of conflict and suffering. There was consensus around the idea that regarding the effects of violence can elicit compassion and foster the solidarity of the human family.

Common Concerns

Roundtable participants recognized the differing ways in which religious and media organizations were concerned about truth, compassion, justice, and the amelioration of social deficiencies of all kinds. While sharing so much in motivation, the media and religious leaders also, however, both recognized a mutual, frequent pattern of misunderstanding and mistrust between religious and media organizations. Ignorance, unfamiliarity, and the urgency of meeting today's deadlines all contribute to perpetuating obstacles to better understanding and cooperation in pursuing common goals. All conference participants agreed that a more activist and forceful voice and presence for the thinking and opinions of religious leaders would be a positive contribution to the public discourse about the most urgent issues of conflict and peace, human rights, health and welfare, justice, and environmental sustainability. There was consensus that the American public would welcome morally authoritative voices and perspectives. And while a general desire was expressed that the U.S. government through the Congress and/or the Federal Communications Commission should find a way to assert some guidance or mandate for fairness, it was also the consensus of the discussion that all the best hopes and standards articulated during the conference would only be realized if the media organizations as well as the individual working reporters viewed their enterprise as a service to the needs of society.

