

Initiatives of Change International website

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The Founder President of the International Communications Forum tells how he found the inspiration for this struggle for ethics in the media

When I first attend an Initiatives of Change conference in Caux, Switzerland, I was neither troubled about my own performance in life nor unduly concerned about the world situation. I felt that I had been successful in my career, had an exciting marriage and was reasonably well off. After that conference I zoomed off to a business meeting in Zurich and then back to London to my West End apartment. You might have thought that the Caux impact had been zero.

But two things happened in the following months, firstly the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of world communism, and the second was reading in the *Financial Times* that the communications industry, including the mass media, had become the largest industry in the world.

The first event seemed to give the chance for a more stable world and many of us thought that now we had it made for democracy and the free market. But, as a media man, the second factor was personally more disturbing to me. It led me to ask myself the question “If we are the largest industry in the world, are we the most responsible?” It was here that, after all, the Caux experience must have been working under the surface, because I felt that the answer was “no”. What was my own attitude to responsibility as the chief executive of the British companies of a multi-national publishing group?

I realised that I had never asked myself the question, “What is the effect for good or ill of your products on the people who read, listen to and watch them?” Nor had I been asked it by my peers or superiors. However, if we did something that had a good social effect, I was happy to take the praise. But if we caused a bad effect I washed my hands of it, saying that we had freedom of information and freedom to publish and that any untoward consequences were a problem for politicians, religious leaders and sociologists, but not mine. I began to think that this was not good enough, that we were not like manufacturers of soap or chocolate, but that our products were affecting the hopes, fears and behaviour of millions of people. It was time that the media stood up to be counted for the influence that we had on society.

Then I asked myself what taking responsibility meant. There was no charter of human responsibility, no international legislation on the subject. I realised that in each of us there is that remarkable piece of high technology called the conscience. It enables us to know right from wrong, truth from falsehood, good from evil. Perhaps with many of us it has been covered over with the compromises of a lifetime, but it is still there and is available for reference.



I decided to accept my conscience as the basis for responsibility. This had some practical consequences. I

decided to drop some questionable accounting devices, to stop using deceptive advertising, to no longer be highly imaginative with my expense accounts, and to be prepared to fight for sound practices in business life. Bill Porter addresses a meeting of the International Communications Forum, at Caux, Switzerland

If you think about it, criminality does not begin in our back streets and on our football terraces, but in the behaviour of those of us with position and influence. In company boardrooms, during lavish entertaining and in the backs of chauffeur-driven cars. If we clean up our act, there will be a remarkable lessening of criminality at all levels in society.

With this dramatic change in my own approach to life I decided to talk it over with my wife, who was Yugoslav, had been a heroine of wartime resistance, had spent three years in a concentration camp and had been sentenced to death by both the Nazis and the Communists, but had retained an amazing resilience and a constructive and direct outlook on life. She listened to me carefully and at the end she looked me in the eyes and said, "If you are thinking that way, why don't you do something about it?" It was that prod which led me to set about bringing a new thinking to the media.

With some hesitation I decided to talk about it with some of my colleagues in publishing, the press, broadcasting and advertising. I say hesitation because I do not like to put up ideas that could be laughed at or ignored. I took the risk and discovered that some of them were also concerned about the effect that we in the media had been having on society over recent decades, unfortunately on a downward and not an upward track. And, simultaneously we have been losing the confidence of the public.

Four of us decided to take action, with the purpose of building up a worldwide network of men and women in the media who would apply moral values in their lives and work and thereby naturally influence their audiences and so create a new climate in the world in which a fair, just and peaceful civilisation could be built.

Our activity was called the International Communications Forum and now reaches more than 2,500 media professionals in 114 countries. A recent President of the World Association of Newspapers, representing two thirds of the world's press, said that the Forum had put the issue of the effect of the media on society on the world's agenda.

If someone had told me on my first visit to the Caux Conferences that I could play a part in bringing a new thinking and living to my industry, I would have dismissed it as fanciful and unrealistic. But it is happening, and I would say to anyone that it can happen to you in your situation, and through your talents, and that you will then have the most satisfying and productive time of your life.

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