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Western Perspectives On Communication :
Relevance To Asia - Remarks

by

Christine Wells
Remarks of  
Chris Wells  
Vice President/International Operations  
The Freedom Forum  

Before the Conference on  
"Communication, Technology and Development: Alternatives for Asia"  
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I'm delighted to be with you today to talk about American communications and its relevance to Asia. The American author, Henry David Thoreau, once said that, "It takes two to speak truth— one to speak and another to hear." I have joined you at this conference because we at The Freedom Forum believe that American and Asian journalists have much to learn from each other. I welcome this opportunity to share my views and look forward to receiving yours during the discussion.

When The Freedom Forum's chairman, Allen Neuharth, founder of USA TODAY, decided to move our foundation into the international sphere, he identified Asia as a region of particular significance for us. With roughly 60 percent of the world's population, booming economic growth, and significant political evolution, Asia is a dynamic force in today's global arena. Despite the fact that our International Division is less than two years old, we are already pursuing ways to enhance communication between journalists in Asia and the United States.
We will do this through a series of initiatives, including training workshops, conferences, seminars, journalism libraries, and other kinds of media-oriented projects. This is why I am particularly pleased to be with you today to offer an American perspective and to hear your own.

The cornerstone of American journalism is the First Amendment to the Constitution that guarantees Americans' right to express themselves freely, question the decisions of our government, and campaign openly against those decisions. This right is based on the concept that government can only respond to the people if there is free and uncensored expression of opinion. Most importantly, free speech is not simply a personal right of individuals to have their say, but it is also the right of others to hear what they have to say.

As the eyes and ears of the public, both print and broadcast press in the United States play a crucial role in guaranteeing that the people's voice is heard. In modern times, the American judicial system has to a great extent guaranteed the press full freedom to publish. However, that freedom is bound within the limits set by the individual rights of citizens. And it is bound by the need to secure the integrity and security of the state which grants freedom to publish in the first place. It is these boundaries that we at The Freedom Forum and other non-governmental organizations in the United States continually seek to explore in order to ensure a truly free press.
There are three topics which are vital to the American media that I want to explore with you today. They are the Freedom of Information Act, investigative reporting, and state or provincial reporting. The reason I have selected these particular topics is that they enable American journalists to practice their craft in pursuit of the truth. Without the Freedom of Information Act, without investigative reporting, and without provincial reporting, our media would be less open and our society less democratic.

The United States is the only country in the world that has a law protecting the public's right to access government information. In 1966, Congress passed the Freedom of Information Act that allows citizens to submit a written request for government information and records. Under the terms of that act, all federal agencies are obligated to provide the material requested except when it affects national defense or foreign policy, personnel and medical files, trade secrets, investigatory records, and other confidential information. Under the law, federal agencies must respond to requests within ten days. Agencies that refuse to release unprivileged information can be sued in federal court, and the burden is on the agencies to explain any refusal to supply material. If the court finds that the government has withheld information, the government pays the legal fees. Some states have laws similar to FOIA to provide citizens with access to state agency files.
Since the inception of the act, more than 250,000 people have requested information with more than 90 percent of their requests granted. However, the act is not perfect, and there are cases of government stonewalling. One such case is that of Terry Anderson, former chief Middle East correspondent for the Associated Press who was held in captivity for seven years. During the past year, he has been a fellow at The Freedom Forum's Media Studies Center which is located at Columbia University in New York City. In order to write a book on his captivity, he has filed countless FOIA requests directed at ten government agencies requesting files on himself, his wife, the Hezbollah, and other hostages. However, Anderson has only received formulaic responses and irrelevant materials, including clips from newspapers. Thus, he has filed one legal appeal, numerous administrative appeals, and is considering suing several federal agencies for misconduct. Frequently, if journalists requests for information are not honored, they do not pursue their FOIA cases because they are under deadline. But as Anderson states so well, "As people interested in the freedom of the press, we have to dig in our heels and say, 'It doesn't matter what my immediate purpose is, we've got to convince these people that the FOIA should have as its purpose greater freedom of information.'"

Despite its imperfections, FOIA is an important means for journalists to access government information and protect the right of the American public to know. Recently, the Clinton
administration appointed a task force that is reviewing how
government documents are classified. It is expected that when
the task force makes its recommendations in November it will
call for more documents to be unclassified.

Countless stories in the media about government corruption
or ineptitude on a national, state, or local level have been revealed
because of journalists' ability to access government documents.
Without doubt, FOIA is an essential tool for investigative
reporters.

All young American reporters view themselves as
investigative reporters because that is, after all, the purpose of the
press—to keep the public informed and make government
accountable. Investigative reporting means uncovering
something somewhere that someone purposely, willfully wants to
keep secret. Let me repeat that. Investigative reporting means
uncovering something somewhere that someone purposely,
willfully wants to keep secret. It might mean a public official
who is stealing, or a company that is manufacturing goods under
misrepresentative labels, or a company that is quietly polluting
rivers. It is a different breed of journalism from day-to-day
coverage because it requires a step back to look at the larger
picture and to search for patterns. Essentially, an investigative
reporter begins with a tentative hypothesis and then establishes a
scientific method of research that is designed to determine the
truth. What investigative reporters look for is a pattern over time
indicating something is wrong in some segment of society. They may work on a story for months or even years.

Some large news organizations in the United States have an investigative team that is headed by a chief investigative reporter, who functions like a city editor. The team has its own headquarters within the newspaper and nobody else on the paper is allowed to come into the investigative room or to ask questions about what is going on. The chief investigative reporter is responsible only to the managing editor. Even the publisher cannot inquire what the team is doing. Reporters who work for the investigative team are not allowed to discuss their activities with any members of the staff. Once the story is reported, however, discussion among staff often follows. But sources are never disclosed.

In smaller news organizations, all reporters work on investigative stories. Once an individual reporter has identified something that might bear further inquiry, the reporter will show it to an editor who then decides whether or not it's worth investigating. If it is, the reporter pursues the lead.

Watergate is without doubt the best-known example of how effective and influential investigative reporting can be. Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward of The Washington Post are famous for their dogged pursuit of leads that ultimately led to the impeachment of President Richard Nixon. Interestingly, when
they first broke the story about a burglary at Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in June 1972, few newspapers picked up the story. In fact, one third of the 30 largest papers that control a quarter of all daily circulation in the United States did not carry the most important Watergate stories prior to the election in November. This in spite of the fact that the stories were available on the wire services. Although Nixon's press secretary insisted that the crimes did not involve a member of the White House staff, Bernstein and Woodward persisted in their search for the truth. It was their meeting in a dark garage at midnight with a faceless source that eventually led to the downfall of President Nixon in August 1974.

Why is Watergate such a watershed in American journalism? Because it demonstrated that if the press has courage, competence, and commitment, it can expose dishonesty even within the White House. It proved that the right to question authority, the right to keep public what belongs to the public, and the right to let free minds, particularly free journalistic minds, function effectively is what makes a society truly just. As a noted American judge once said, "Liberty lives in the hearts of men; if it dies there, no law, no courts, no constitution can keep it alive."

While Watergate is the best known example of American investigative reporting, we must remember that it is only one example of what is happening on a much more local level throughout the United States. There is no doubt that the United
States is more decentralized than are most other nations. Each state has its own constitution and its own laws. It also has its own communications network. The fact that there are only two national newspapers—USA TODAY and the Wall Street Journal—means that many Americans depend on local news organizations for their information and for help in formulating their views.

The average reporter on the average newspaper in the average American city is just as important, if not more so, than any Washington correspondent. That is because reporters in the average American city are covering stories that usually have more of an immediate impact or effect on the personal lives of Americans.

Back in the summer of 1979, the Charlotte Observer, based in Charlotte, North Carolina, decided to examine the controversy concerning a lung disease that cotton mill workers were contracting because of cotton dust. At the time, the textile industry was the largest industrial employer in the South. Reporters for the Observer began by examining the records of the state labor department and soon found labor officials quite cooperative. They then turned to law firms to get numerous records of the compensation claims filed by mill workers who had brown lung disease. One of the most significant findings that reporters made was that the state had begun testing mill workers
back in 1969. But state officials had agreed with the mills not to inform workers about the purpose of the tests.

Seven months after the start of its investigation, the Charlotte Observer presented its readers with its findings. Despite a government study published 13 years earlier, workers were still being crippled by cotton dust, many cotton mill owners were continuing to deny the danger, were fighting workers' compensation claims, were delaying clean-up of their mills, and were violating government regulations. The Observer won a host of awards for its investigation, including the Pulitzer Prize for public service. Up until this time, many newspapers had hesitated to challenge the textile industry because of its power both in terms of advertising and as a local employer.

There is one other example of the power of investigative reporting outside a country's capital that I would like to share with you. John Seigenthaler is a Freedom Forum trustee and the chairman of our First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. He used to be the publisher of the Nashville Tennessean. In 1979, he picked up a copy of the paper and saw a picture of members of the Ku Klux Klan collecting money from passerby at a roadblock 40 miles from his house. Now, the Klan is an organization that calls for white supremacy and opposes racial integration. Recently, the Klan had been making news because of its new public relations campaign.
Seigenthaler was curious about the picture and decided to investigate the increased profile of the Klan using three approaches. He assigned reporters to find out who was involved with the Klan at the local level and who their leaders were. He sent a team out to do a regional investigation of the Klan out in the open. And he sent a reporter undercover. That reporter assumed a false identity and joined the Klan.

When all of these reporters put the pieces together they found that Klan activity was more widespread than it had been ten years earlier. In April 1980, they published a 13-part series in the *Tennessean*. Shortly afterwards, officials in Nashville stopped a Klan group just as they were about to plant a bomb at a crowded Jewish building. Later, police uncovered a plot to bomb a local television broadcast tower because of a Jewish commentator. But most important according to Seigenthaler is that the public came to understand that the Klan has the potential for violence wherever it comes together.

All of the above examples require one key element that is the most basic of all reporters' instincts—curiosity. It is curiosity that leads Terry Anderson to find out what the government files say about him. It was curiosity that led Bernstein and Woodward to explore who was behind the break-in into Democratic headquarters. And it was curiosity that motivated the reporters at the *Charlotte Observer* and the *Tennessean* to dig and find a societal ill. I believe that it is this very basic reporter's instinct
combined with training in the areas that I have outlined that will ultimately lead Asian journalists to a freer and more open press.