

Responsibility of the Media - 1985

Issue

New technology has greatly accelerated reporting of news events. Increasingly, the number of persons reporting the news and the frequency of such reports as exemplified by the recent TWA hijacking, results in unverified or unverifiable information being transmitted, conjecture and editorial comments untested against balanced judgment and a tendency for the media to be manipulated. Acts of terrorism particularly lend themselves to this crisis atmosphere which raises new questions of interpreting responsible reporting.

Background

Free speech and a free press are hallmarks of democratic societies and undergird the precious quality of liberty. The Bill of Rights in the United States and Charter of Rights and Freedoms in Canada guarantee these rights for their respective citizens. The exercise of these basic rights carries with it a burden of responsibility often creating a tension between personal freedoms to exercise these rights and the impact on society. Increased technology adds new dimensions of testing this tension and new situations which require constant evaluation and examination. The dilemma has been phrased by Abba Eban: "If the right to know is carried to excess and peace is threatened, what has been accomplished?"

Reform Judaism embodies the freedom that characterizes America and all democratic societies. A profound respect for the truth and the freedom to pursue it are part of the Jewish tradition. Reform Jewish leadership has always spoken out against censorship of any kind.

"Jews are more secure in an open society but they have long served as goads to the national conscience. Jewish security is interwoven with the preservation of a free society in which all people can express their fullest potentialities" (Albert Vorspan, Reform Judaism and Social Action).

The concepts of freedom of the press and freedom of speech encourage the opportunities to awaken the national conscience or to reassign priorities or to make commitments to attend to the needs of the less fortunate in society.

In pursuit of the truth and to satisfy the public's right to know, journalists report world events through every means of communication—newspapers, magazines, radio and television.

Because news services maintain correspondents in every part of the world and receive news from them by radio, cable, telegraph and telephone, they are able to report world events as they are happening. In the case of television news, often information comes so quickly that there is insufficient time for review and background checks. The impact is felt immediately. Floods, starving children, scenes from battlefields, accidents, hostages and terrorists are brought to television viewers on a daily basis.

The media has often been accused of allowing itself to be manipulated or of presenting a one-sided view of certain events or issues. In recent months the media has recognized that these are valid concerns and has begun to address them.

Resolution

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- 1) The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods commends the media on its self-examination of its role and its conscious efforts to balance the public's right to know with a fair presentation of the issues.
- 2) We urge that journalists consciously refrain from exploiting the emotions of individuals and families involved directly and indirectly in crisis situations or emotional commemorative events.
- 3) We ask our Sisterhoods to urge the broadcasting industry and the FCC to retain and increase time allotted to public interest programming.

We further urge that even in a crisis situation newsclips and commentary ensure integrity, objectivity and appropriateness.