

Media Credibility and Social Responsibility

Sun Myung Moon
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Honorable chairman, distinguished co-chairmen, ladies and gentlemen:

It is my pleasure to welcome you all to the seventh World Media Conference here in Tokyo, Japan. I am sorry I cannot be in Tokyo to welcome you in person. However, please be assured that my spirit is with you.

I hold the Japanese people and their nation in the highest esteem. They are setting a standard of excellence in the modern world. I am sure that everyone can learn a great deal from this Asian nation, which has achieved an economic miracle in our time and has become one of the great powers of the world.

As members of the electronic and print media, you represent the most powerful, influential and select group on the face of the earth today. In contrast to every other comparable profession in the world, most free nations have very few laws governing the conduct of the media -- and that's good.

People who are blessed to live in freedom know that a free press can be the strongest deterrent to dictatorship. More than political, economic or academic measures, the impact of the press is the most immediate on our society. This is certainly the belief of the World Media Association. But when there is little outside control, the only person standing between yourself and the abuse of your power is you.

Freedom is indeed one of the most precious gifts of the Creator. Human beings are created to be free spiritual beings, but when God created human beings free, He also gave them responsibility. Freedom requires self-discipline and self-control.

Freedom is bound by law. There are natural physical and spiritual laws at work in the universe and they are the ultimate limits of freedom. You are free to go to the top of the New Otani Hotel and jump off. That is your freedom, but your free act will bring your own destruction because you are going against the laws of nature. You are free to go into the ocean and breathe water instead of air, but the laws of nature will again be operating. Your lungs cannot bear it, and your life will be destroyed. No one can dispute this fact.

Spiritual laws, however, are not so obvious, yet they are as absolute as the laws of nature. To recognize spiritual law, we must recognize human beings as spiritual beings, created by God, the first spiritual Being in the universe.

God alone, being the Creator, determines the purpose of creation and sets the spiritual law. All value begins with God. God has already determined the purpose of human life and how human beings can fulfill that purpose. This is the foundation of absolute value. From this absolute value foundation, moral principles emerge and these moral principles comprise the spiritual law.

Human beings, created as spiritual beings, are bound by this spiritual law. We are here on earth to fulfill the fundamental human purpose as determined by the Creator. Our spiritual well-being is served as we fulfill our individual purpose in accordance with the moral law established by God. When we violate this law, we invite self-destruction, just as we do when we violate the laws of nature.

All of us, before we are journalists or any other kind of professional, are first human beings. The first responsibility of a human being is to exercise freedom in accord with basic moral principles. For the journalist, freedom of the press must be exercised according to certain moral standards that are the common ground for all free men and women. This is where the importance of responsibility in media comes in. For this reason, as founder of the World Media Association, I emphasize and fight for freedom of the press as well as the moral responsibility of the media.

Thomas Jefferson wrote, quite correctly: "The press is the best instrument for enlightening the mind of man and improving him as a rational, moral and social being." Jefferson went so far as to say our very liberty itself depends on freedom of the press, and that press freedom could never be limited, not even a little bit, without being lost entirely. There is a great deal of truth in this.

Yet, how can we become an instrument for enlightening the mind of man and inspiring him as a rational, moral and social being without ourselves first being rational, moral and social beings? We must understand the basic principles determining what is moral and what is immoral. We must come to a basic understanding of the spiritual law of God.

Democracy cannot be exercised without a free press. And a free press cannot be truly free unless exercised with moral responsibility. I believe that a free press is a moral press. We who are media professionals take special pride in this. This is why we can say that journalists hold a special place in our society. They are the guardians of freedom and fighters against injustice.

In recent years, however, has our press been a moral and responsible press? Let us take the example of the press in the United States. The United States is considered to be the best example of a democratic system. The United States Constitution guarantees freedom of the press. Nevertheless, it is clear that the media's credibility and esteem are declining.

Studies show that in increasing numbers, people do not believe the newscaster as much as they used to. There seems to be floating through the fabric of society a growing perception of media arrogance and untrustworthiness. Last year, when United States troops were sent to Grenada, journalists were excluded from the scene. An *NBC Nightly News* commentator said what many members of the media were feeling. He said, "The American government is doing whatever it wants to, without any representative of the American public watching what it is doing."

The response that quickly poured into the offices of NBC in the form of letters and phone calls was that viewers supported the government's action five to one. An ABC newsman said that 99 percent of his mail supported President Reagan's decision to keep the press out of Grenada. *Time* magazine received many letters on the issue, running eight to one against the press.

In 1976, the National Opinion Research Center conducted a poll, which determined that only 29 percent of the American population had "a great deal of confidence in the press." Public esteem was already low, but eight years later that number has fallen even lower: to 13.7 percent in a recent survey, and it continues to decline.

Why is this? Why is the public refusing to believe the media? The public suspects selfish motivation behind news reporting, and people see that media practice has become increasingly irresponsible, sensationalistic and unprincipled.

The media cannot be apathetic to the trend of decreasing credibility. We cannot close our eyes to our responsibility for the future of the world. We, as founders, owners, writers and broadcasters of the media, must squarely face the judgment of public opinion, the judgment of history and the judgment of God.

Our job at the World Media Conference and the World Media Association is to restore declining media credibility to a wholesome level of trust and confidence. This is why our theme this year is, "Media Credibility and Social Responsibility" We must recover the public trust, draft an accurate account of history, and gain the approval of God, the Creator and final judge of us all.

The media, along with the future of the free world, is at a crossroads. On the one hand, if you try to limit press freedom by legal means, you will most likely destroy it altogether. On the other hand, a media that can rampage at will, out of control, will always be in danger of losing its sacred public trust, with the same resulting loss of press freedom.

The only workable answer to this dilemma is self-imposed integrity and discipline. You have to be strong and free enough to resist tampering on the part of governments, and you must be moral and righteous and stand up for justice, or you will abuse the faith of the people and eventually lose press freedom. The lesson of history is that the result of the abuse of power is the loss of freedom. To be a great journalist, you must be a great human being, living in accord with the moral law of God. Therefore, the challenge of journalism starts from the challenge of being a moral and righteous person.

At this seventh World Media Conference, I propose to begin the work of a Media Ethics Committee as a way to help bring about a greater media awareness of the need to be our own watchdog. This type of committee must be free from any government influence. It must be made up of distinguished representatives of the world press to serve the following purposes:

1. To monitor specific cases, issues and prevailing trends in journalism.
2. To seek realistic standards of practice from representatives of the media that could be explored for adoption into the media's common ethic.
3. To speak out strongly on specific instances of abuse by the media, to call into question our own actions before the public does, and to recognize contributions by individuals and organizations to the cause of journalistic responsibility.
4. To create the Media Ethics Award, to be given at each year's World Media Conference to the person or organization anywhere in the world whose work best embodies the highest ideals of journalism in action, and whose work contributes the most to elevating public trust in the media profession.

If this conference can become the birthplace of this new endeavor, which will contribute to the protection of the free media and promote and enhance media responsibility, then we will have done a monumental good in history.

It has been my firm belief that the media is the guardian of freedom and upholder of the truth. There is no better way to fight totalitarian systems than by promoting free and responsible media. I echo the historical maxim, "The pen is mightier than the sword." In our modern day, this includes the microphone and camera as well.

I know that the gathering of the World Media Conference is a gathering of the mightiest forces on earth. I am confident that with this mighty force properly exercising its power, we can secure freedom for all humankind and peace for the entire world.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am writing this message to you from the United States federal prison in Danbury, Connecticut. More than anybody else, I understand the preciousness of freedom but I cannot bend my principles for the sake of my own freedom. I am fighting against injustice and government encroachment not only on my freedom, but also on the freedom of millions of oppressed people on the face of the earth.

May God bless you and your conference in Tokyo.

Thank you very much.