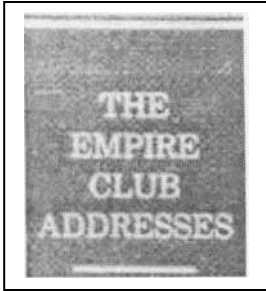


Journalistic Freedom and Responsibility
A.W. Johnson



Journalistic Freedom and Responsibility

Speaker Johnson, A.W. President of the CBC

Date 1 Dec 1977

Introduced by: Peter Hermant, President of The Empire Club of Canada

Published in: The Empire Club of Canada Speeches 1977-1978, Edited by Peter Hermant (Toronto, Canada: The Empire Club Foundation, 1978) pp. 141-162

DECEMBER 1, 1977
Journalistic Freedom and Responsibility
AN ADDRESS BY A. W. Johnson, PRESIDENT OF THE CBC

Introduction by Mr. Peter Hermant, President of the Empire Club of Canada:

Ladies and gentlemen: "If there hadn't been a CBC, I wouldn't have had any real sense of Canada, or of being a Canadian, when I was growing up. In a small town, your outlook can be very parochial. What you see is what you feel--unless there's some link with the outside." The man who said those words is our guest of honour today, Albert Wesley Johnson--whom almost everybody in the country refers to as "Al".

Al Johnson's career in government service at the Ottawa level didn't start until he was forty years of age and by that time his character was firmly rooted in a tradition very different from his fellow government workers.

He was born in Insinger, Saskatchewan, the son of a United Church minister. His education led him to the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Toronto and finally to Harvard, where he obtained a Ph.D. degree in Political Economy--Canada's own Dr. Johnson.

Blaik Kirby, writing in The Globe and Mail, describes Johnson as "Brilliant but amiable--a mandarin without haughtiness. His smile does not conceal his steely jaw line. He is gentle but tough." It sounds like an astrological sign description!

Al Johnson started his civil service career in his home province of Saskatchewan as administrative analyst with the budget bureau for the then CCF government. He rose rapidly to be director of the administrative management division of the budget bureau, deputy provincial treasurer and secretary of the Saskatchewan Treasury Board. In 1964, Mr. Johnson arrived in Ottawa as assistant deputy minister of finance, later to be economic adviser to the Prime Minister on the constitution, secretary of the Treasury Board and, before his appointment to the CBC, deputy minister of health and welfare.

Graham Spry is quoted as saying, "Radio broadcasting is not to be considered or dismissed as a business only. It is no more a business than the public school system, the religious organizations or the varied literary, musical and scientific endeavours of the Canadian people. It is a public service. It is a national service."



Address to the Empire Club, Toronto, December 1, 1977

Journalistic Freedom and Responsibility
A.W. Johnson

Many people would question Al Johnson's sanity in moving to the CBC as its president--considering the harshness with which the corporation is viewed from time to time.

Christina Newman, writing also in The Globe and Mail, sums up the political opinion. "For the last decade they've been telling us that the CBC is in a horrendous mess, that it's lost its vitality and destroyed or driven out its best talent. Each successive president takes the job knowing he'll bear the blame for what is inevitably called 'the failure of CBC to live up to its mandate'."

In the same article, Ms. Newman quotes an old-time broadcaster on his guidelines for the "perfect" CBC president: "The best president of the CBC would be an idealistic SOB--35 years old--perfectly bilingual--willing to wade in blood up to his ankles and with a feeling for the country in his soul."

Well, certainly Al Johnson qualifies on some of those terms.

"I'm not going to go out making waves for the fun of it," he says. "But a president of the CBC has a certain public responsibility and I'm going to do what has got to be done

for the well-being of the CBC. Generally speaking, my expectation is that this will not require a great public role on my part."

Expected or not, Al Johnson's profile has been relatively high--perhaps because his presidency has come at a particularly sensitive time for the CBC and for the country. "The Canadian people really seem to want an infinity of choice," he says. "In the face of that, the CBC is bound to concentrate on the excellence of its programs. That's the major instrument we have, both nationally and regionally."

But how will Al Johnson fare under the typically fickle nature of the semi-political limelight? Well, he's been quoted as saying, "Some people think that because I come from the civil service I would not be the kind to stand up to politicians. They just don't understand the kind of people you find in the civil service."

It should be obvious then that Al Johnson means to make his usual success of his CBC presidency. "The guy in charge has to foster among the people who work for him a climate within which vitality and excitement and new ideas can flourish," he says. "I did that in Saskatchewan. I did it at the Treasury Board. I did it at Health and Welfare and I'll do it at the CBC. Beyond that, it seems to me that what the president needs is to care about the corporation and to feel within himself a certain strength of will."

It's a pleasure for me, ladies and gentlemen, to introduce to you the president of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Mr. Albert W. (Al) Johnson, who will address us under the title "Journalistic Freedom and Responsibility".

MR. JOHNSON:

You've all seen, I'm sure, the kind of impact the recent introduction of television in the House of Commons has had. It's brought about a heightened realization of how important television can be as a means of communication. And I find it irresistible to think back to Edmund Burke when he had just realized the communicating impact of the establishment in 1772 of the right to publish Parliamentary debates. Speaking in the House and lifting his hand rather dramatically towards the gallery, he said: "Yonder sits the fourth estate, more important than them all."

If that was true in Edmund Burke's day more than two hundred years ago, how much truer it is today when the distance between what we know and what we need to know seems to be greater than ever. There never has been a greater need for truly effective media, and for public confidence in the media.

We stake everything--indeed, the whole notion of democratic society--on a rational dialogue of an informed public. And only the media can reach the mass of population to provide the basis of information for that rational dialogue.

If I may, I'd like to begin my remarks today with four flat and perhaps provocative assertions:

First, I profoundly believe that the fourth estate ... the press ... the media ... whatever you want to call it, is a crucial element in the cement that holds together our democratic society. In our increasingly complex society the media constitute the only way the mass of people can find out what's going on, can communicate with each other, and can communicate with their government and their government with them.

In short, without free, independent media, no democratic society can survive.



Address to the Empire Club, Toronto, December 1, 1977

Journalistic Freedom and Responsibility
A.W. Johnson

My second point really flows out of my first. Because the media are so crucial, so fundamental to democracy, I believe the media must be socially responsible. I have not the slightest doubt that freedom of the media requires a sense of public responsibility on the part of the media.

My third point is that I believe the demands on the media are rising faster, and public expectations of the media are rising faster than the capacity of the media has grown to meet them. We must do more to match our performance with the demands and the expectations.

My fourth point is that if public credibility and public trust in the media decline, public resentment will follow and so will a search for mechanisms by which the media can be guided, even directed, to meet their social obligations. And to some this even suggests government intervention--something which is manifestly unacceptable if we are to maintain the free and independent media which are so essential to freedom of speech and discussion.

I want to talk about journalism today because frankly I think journalism and freedom of the press are at something of a crossroad.

Journalism goes back to the earliest days of Rome, and ever since there have been arguments about objectivity and fairness and balance. Indeed I suppose that argument may have begun when at the trial of Jesus Christ Pontius Pilate raised the question: "What is truth?"

Mass media began in the 1400s with a merging of Asian and European paper, ink and printing skills. These were authoritarian times, and almost as soon as the printing press was invented, church and state censorship controlled the media.

But the very fact of mass communication--mass printing--began to undermine the authoritarianism of church and state. About the time of Walpole the growth of mass communication in England, the spread of printed material, swamped the ability of government to preserve itself from sedition by prior censorship of everything in circulation. So governments were forced to resort to punishing editors after the fact of publication, not before.

It was Jon M objections to prior restraint on publishers in England which laid this cornerstone for eventual freedom of the press. He argued as early as 1644 for the "free marketplace of ideas" and felt that if all ideas were freely published, the best ones would win out. An editor's total freedom, he felt, was the prerequisite for a working democracy. This eventually led to the very opposite of authoritarianism--to what was called libertarianism--a kind of Adam Smith laissez faire theory of the media.

The assumption was that the citizen could and would read all available journals so he would absorb the news from all political points of view, sort out the good ideas from the bad, and come to his own conclusions.

In the 19th century most of the press was a "party press" bought and paid for generally by political parties, and so it was necessary for the citizen to read all papers in order to get a full perspective.

This "libertarian" premise of the citizen reading all papers was questionable in the first place, but with the complexities of modern society and with the millions of words fired at us every day and night in newspapers, magazines, radio and television, this premise has become downright unrealistic. The citizen simply does not have the time to read, hear and see everything. He or she, therefore, has to rely on one or two or three principal sources of information. That, in turn, makes today's journalist a sort of "agent" of the citizen in his quest for knowledge.

In short, today's journalist is really only doing for the citizen what the "libertarian" philosophy said the citizen should do for himself. This has led to new responsibilities to the public for the journalist, and has led to a new philosophy, one I would call socially responsible journalism. Because he is an "agent" for the citizen and because the citizen relies on him more than ever before, the socially responsible journalist today has an obligation to be fair, accurate, thorough, comprehensive and balanced. To do that, both the individual journalist and the individual journalistic organization must report the news accurately, fairly, thoroughly, comprehensively and in a balanced manner.

In effect, therefore, the journalist has had placed in his hands, by the public, the responsibility for providing fair and comprehensive reportage of what is happening. And the public has a right to expect of him that he will discharge this trust. In that sense the media are accountable to the public.

Put this another way. The first responsibility of the journalist, the journalistic organization, is to inform. It is in the discharge of this responsibility that the question of social responsibility arises--the obligation of the journalist to do his job with accuracy, fairness, thoroughness, comprehensiveness and balance.

The case for socially responsible journalism flows from this, it seems to me. The right to freedom of the press exists to facilitate, to make possible freedom of speech and discussion. And with this right goes a corresponding obligation.



Address to the Empire Club, Toronto, December 1, 1977

Journalistic Freedom and Responsibility
A.W. Johnson

For the media, socially responsible journalism is a matter of enlightened self-interest. The degree of respect the public holds for the media, their trust in the media, determines in no small measure our effectiveness in acting as their agents for information and knowledge.

Today, it seems to me, that public respect which the media must have to be effective is in danger of being undermined by the fast-rising demands and expectations being placed on them, and by the difficulties inherent in responding rapidly to these demands and expectations.

Consider the dimensions of the problem. The amount of information which can and must be put at the public's disposal has grown enormously--in international, national, provincial and local news. The issues being debated have proliferated--economic, social, environmental, cultural, political, governmental. And the complexity of the issues has been compounded even as our capacity to understand and analyze them has grown. The sheer volume of what has to be covered is a measure of these difficulties.

The editors of the CBC National, for example, see more than a quarter of a million words flowing across their desks every day and from that they choose about 3,000 for the National. The New York Times receives two and a half million words a day and chooses 185,000.

More, the very nature of these choices makes journalism about the most pluralistic kind of business I've ever known. Decision-makers are all over the place--hundreds of them. The reporter, the editor, the headline-writer, the editorial writer, the assignment desk, the lineup editor, the producer, the director, not to mention the publisher or the president. All are making decisions of one kind or another leading to what you see or hear or read.

It is the ability of journalists and journalism to cope with these rising demands and increasing public expectations which is at issue, it seems to me. In its totality, we have today much better, much more comprehensive, much more professional, much more balanced journalism than we have ever had. But the problem is that we must be better still if we are to cope with these rising public expectations and demands.

And this is no easy task. Consider this journalist, this person on whom we are placing these expectations and demands. Obviously, he or she must have the highest professional standards; must be socially aware; intellectually acute; economically knowledgeable and politically sensitive. That's a lot to expect, and particularly from one whose healthy scepticism, sometimes, may have turned to cynicism or a kind of negativism. I'm reminded of Senator Keith Davey's phrase that "most Canadian newsrooms are boneyards of broken dreams".

Despite that pessimism, however, I find in most of our journalists today a determination and a dedication to the proposition of socially responsible journalism that far exceeds what is sometimes believed of them. But it remains that there is a gap between what we are trying to do and what the public demands and expects of us.

There have always been tensions between the media and the institutions of any society. But I'm truly apprehensive about the concern with the media, today, by what might be called the opinion-multipliers--the communicators, businessmen, farm and labour leaders, religious groups, politicians, teachers, and social activists of all kinds. So far this concern is not really shared by the mass of Canadians. In fact, according to recent surveys, a large majority of Canadians still do have a high regard for the media and generally rank journalists well up on the scale of honest and ethical professionals.

But criticisms there are, and we would do well to ponder on them. Let me mention a few.

Anti-establishment. It's a feeling, a perception in much of the public that we concentrate too much on tearing down society's institutions, that we are too negative, reporting and investigating the relatively small percentage of malpractice in our institutions and ignoring their constructive activities. Edgar Burton, president of Simpsons, said the other day the media too often seem to suggest business does nothing but "bribe politicians, pollute rivers, scar the land, poison the labour force and produce cancer-causing drugs."

Shallowness. Harry Boyle, for example, former chairman of the CRTC, has said that Canadians are turned off by glib, superficial news. It's a concern that informing Canadians calls for a breadth and a depth in the coverage of society and social developments which is not achieved through the mere coverage of events. Underlying trends in society, underlying issues of complexity and difficulty too often get crowded out by the less important, the more immediate, the more superficial.

Sensationalism. It's a complaint that the media, and in particular television, are too often attracted to the sensational--to the theatrical, to the explosive events--instead of dealing with important matters of intellectual substance. Ideas are news, but too often they get crowded out by events. The complaint is that the media tend to sensationalize by minimizing the conflict of ideas and maximizing the conflict in the streets without relating the second to the first.



Address to the Empire Club, Toronto, December 1, 1977

Journalistic Freedom and Responsibility
A.W. Johnson

We are accused of too often looking for good guys and bad guys, for social confrontation and not social co-operation. Labour and business, for instance, both complain that the media's coverage of their activities concentrates largely on strikes. Walter Wriston, chairman of Citibank, put it differently when he complained of the "needless harping about the shortcomings of our society."

Or the complaint of crusading ... that the media are on a sort of "high" from the Watergate stimulant and are obsessed with trying to do the job of the police or the courts.

Then there is the widespread complaint that the news coverage of networks which serve the whole nation is geographically biased, that they reflect Toronto and Montreal and Ottawa but not the rest of the country. On the other side, there are those who charge that the media are captives of the establishment and who complain that investigative reportage is only a token challenge to the establishment. These critics say that since the media are dependent for economic survival on the business or governmental institutions of the country they never really will challenge the social structure.

Well, the complaints are endless. And they are, I'm afraid, increasingly shrill and increasingly pointed.

Having said this, it must be recognized that there are very real limitations to what the media can be expected to do. Obviously the media cannot solve all the problems of mankind. They did not invent the problems they report, nor can they be held responsible for the events which they report, however discomforting those events may be. More, there are limits on the capacity of each medium to do the whole of the job expected of the media. Television, for example, deals with ideas and abstractions with greater difficulty than do magazines and newspapers. It is more impressionistic, more visceral. The printed word, on the other hand, is capable of being more intellectual, more structured. Each medium must strive to enrich what it does to the extent of its limitations, but it cannot pretend to do the whole job of the whole media.

What I'm trying to say is that in its evaluation of the media the public must try to recognize the media's limitations. For you can't, in logic, condemn the cat for not being a dog.

It must be said, too, still on the other side of the complaints against the media, that everybody does seem to want to see their own self-image projected to the public at large.

Politicians want more understanding treatment; moralists want their own ideas asserted; business and labour want programs to reflect a greater insight into their problems; and a multitude of citizen groups want their viewpoints to dominate. And no wonder they do, since the media constitute the only way they can communicate with the mass of Canadians. When the journalist seeks to apply independent judgement to all these demands the critics too often confuse that independence with an adversary role.

But the media must be independent. They must be a fair witness to reality, even when some elements of society may not like that reality. For their first responsibility is to inform, and thus to facilitate free and open discussion in the community.

When there are deep divisions among the public and when debate is shrill, inevitably the media are the target of abuse simply because the protagonists are utterly dependent on the media to carry their arguments. Most protagonists are not happy when the media show attitudes conflicting with their own. What they intuitively look for is a reinforcement of their attitudes and prejudices. When that does not occur, the perception of bias often arises.

Part of our job, however, must be to enlarge public understanding of uncomfortable problems, and I quite understand that inevitably that gets some people riled up. I believe journalism serves democracy best by airing widely and often wildly differing points of public view. Even in the canonization of a saint, the church listens to a passionate Devil's advocate. It was American Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes who said there must be "freedom for the thought you hate."

But sadly, it often is not so much a lack of accuracy but a dissatisfaction with the message that leads to public concern.

In the journalistic business that's known as the "Cleopatra syndrome" or "kill the messenger". In Shakespeare's version, when the messenger advises Cleopatra that Mark Antony has married Octavia, her anger at the news is taken out on the messenger. She calls him an "infectious pestilence" and suggests he be "whipped by wire", "stewed in brine", "smart in lingering pickle", be scalped, and finally killed.

Ending her tirade, Cleopatra says: "Though it be honest, it is never good to bring bad news."

My colleagues and I know full well how Cleopatra's messenger felt. But even so, if we are to be honest we must report good and bad news. I should add there is a lot of so-called good news that seems to go unnoticed. In broadcast terms, for instance, programs which strengthen our institutions, news about national celebrations, Parliament, religious services, historical shows, music and sports events all constitute a kind of social glue of one kind or another reinforcing the sense of belonging to our



Journalistic Freedom and Responsibility
A.W. Johnson

country. All these have to go into the balance in weighing the total output of the CBC or any broadcaster, newspaper or magazine.

Now, having noted what our critics are saying, and having spoken of some of our problems, please don't think I'm dismissing the media critics. Far from it. To be honest, I think we in the media too often are excessively defensive in response to public criticism. The media must listen to the sound of criticism even though the complaints may not always be valid as stated. Oftentimes people tend to ask the wrong questions. And too often their attacks on the media are so extreme that they become sitting ducks for, frankly, a glib lecture on freedom of the press.

But it remains that, to paraphrase Cromwell, we must always be prepared to consider the possibility that we may be wrong, that underlying even the most sweeping, the most cantankerous criticisms, there may be the kernel of a real and valid--if unarticulated--cause for concern.

And there are fundamental questions about the media that do worry me. I hear the critics and while I can often find a ready answer to their specific complaints, the theme, the underlying music, the underlying dirge of discontent is much more disturbing.

It seems to me that many of our critics feel the mass media are out of control, that they have grown so big, so powerful and so removed from the public that no one can control them. So, as I have said, there is a tendency to search for some mechanism for control. And despite the general conviction that state control is not the answer, for it is such a thoroughly dangerous and unacceptable proposition, some still think of government, whether consciously or unconsciously, as a kind of residual legatee of responsibility in the media.

Indeed, an underlying public desire for order, sometimes even at the expense of freedom, is never far from the surface.

What is more, governments tend to fill vacuums, to do jobs which other units of society don't do for themselves. Let me pose the dilemma in another way. What does indeed lie between the laws of libel on the one extreme and government intervention on the other as a method of ensuring that the media are socially responsible in doing their job? How do we improve the quality of our journalism to meet the rising public demands and expectations? What measures do we employ for ensuring that we are fulfilling the social responsibilities which accompany our obligation to inform?

Well, I don't pretend to have all the answers. And certainly there are no miracle cures, but I would like to suggest some guideposts for socially responsible journalism:

First--we need to improve our journalistic professionalism.

Second--we must more fully articulate, elaborate and illustrate our code of ethics, our journalistic policies.

Third--we must pay more serious attention to public complaints.

Fourth--we should widen the use of press councils, and establish a Broadcast Complaints Commission in Canada to consider public concerns about unfair treatment.

Fifth--we must take the public more fully into our confidence and make them aware of our policies and standards so there is something against which to measure clearly our performance.

Now, may I expand on these points one by one.

First, our need to work on improving the performance of our journalistic profession. That's a central responsibility of all journalistic organizations. Unless the news organizations of this country, and for me that most especially includes the CBC, are prepared to do what is necessary to help improve the performance of our journalism, we won't earn public confidence and support.

We must spend more effort and more money on training; on specialization so that we develop recognized expertise in a variety of important areas; on rotations, especially for national journalistic organizations, so that reporters and producers and editors move around the country to get a better sense of the geographic and cultural breadth of Canada.

We must spend more effort and money on seminars of all kinds, to bring journalists together to confront the key policy issues of fairness, balance and thoroughness and their practical applications--and sometimes bring together not just the journalists themselves but with them their executives, and representatives from the public, in a kind of synergistic dialogue.

My second prescription is that we must make a greater effort to articulate and to elaborate our code of ethics of journalistic professionalism. And to illustrate what they mean in their application.



Address to the Empire Club, Toronto, December 1, 1977

Journalistic Freedom and Responsibility
A.W. Johnson

Most organizations, including the CBC, do have such a code of ethics or book of policies. But it seems to me we need to discuss those policies much more fully than we have done, and we need to make sure our reporters, editors and producers are fully aware of them and are following them. We need to illustrate more fully our policies with specific examples so that they take on a more comprehensible and meaningful shape.

I attach a great deal of importance to this point. For journalistic standards must be the agreed agenda of journalism, for the journalist and the public alike. The journalists must be guided by them when they prepare their stories and their analyses of the news, and the public should employ them when they are judging the story and analysis which they read and hear and watch.

Articulating and elaborating these standards, and certainly applying them, is no easy task. Let me illustrate why. The central question in any journalistic code of ethics is this: how do we achieve balance and fairness in news coverage?

Well, in the first place, there are two kinds of balance and fairness: one provided by the individual journalist doing a story; and the other provided by the journalistic organization itself in the weighting of material in its total output. Each has a responsibility to be balanced and fair.

Like all of us, journalists have opinions and biases of their own. Their geographic and cultural roots will affect their attitudes. It simply is not possible for any thinking citizen today to be totally neutral or objective--which is to say, free of all personal feelings in describing an issue or event. What journalists must do is to recognize their attitudes and opinions and step aside from these in reporting and editing. I don't demand that the journalist be a eunuch in the harem of ideas. What I demand, what good journalism demands, is fairness--a fairness induced by the journalist's professionalism.

To be professional is not to be without opinions but it is to be self-aware and self-correcting. Something like being a member of a jury. The juror is not empty-headed of past experience or attitudes, but he is expected to put aside his prejudices in weighing the evidence. It's the same thing with the reporter or editor weighing the evidence of a news story.

There are, of course, opinion commentators or columnists who do take a point of view, and that's perfectly acceptable, provided they declare their biases and provided the journalistic organization carrying their viewpoints has an overall balance in its opinion journalism. If it does not, it cannot expect public credibility as an independent journalistic institution.

And let's remember the media are not simply spectators at the issues and events of our time. We are participants, because we in the media identify, we choose what we consider are the significant trends, issues and events, and set aside others.

The media hold a mirror up to society but we raise that mirror selectively. And we have to recognize that the very raising of the mirror will change the character of the event or issue by intensifying it or glamorizing it or denigrating it. In holding up that mirror we must bear in mind that a rigid application of objectivity or neutrality is capable of lifting fools to the level of wise men or often giving the lie a big head start when a demagogue is quoted at face value.

As Mark Twain said, "A lie can travel half-way around the world while truth is still putting on its shoes."

But in speaking of fairness, the articulation of our code of ethics must also mean equality of fairness. It is easier to be fair to a big man than to a small man. It is easier to be fair to someone who can hit you back. It is easier to be fair to someone you like. By fairness I mean giving justice to all, big and little, the likable and the unlikable.

Impartiality is part of being fair. In some quarters, the notion of impartiality is under siege. Some sociologists say no one can be perfectly impartial and some producers say it leads to programs being drowned in a babble of voices. For my part, I think impartiality is composed of three elements.

First, we must allow the widest possible range of views to be expressed. After all, even a wrong opinion may contain a grain of truth that helps find the whole truth.

Second, we must not only take account of the whole range of views on an issue, but also of the weight of opinion which holds those views. The greater weight obviously goes to views that are held by more people. The challenging of accepted orthodoxies should be reported but so also should the established view be fully and clearly put. Third, the range of views and the weight of opinion are constantly changing and these dynamics of change must be carefully considered and weighed.

Another element of fairness is breadth of coverage--the dimension, the texture, the nuances. Without this we attract the contempt of politicians, businessmen and specialists of all kinds for we become excessively simplistic.



Journalistic Freedom and Responsibility
A.W. Johnson

At the CBC, may I say, we try to remedy that by supplementing the newscasts with documentaries, special background programs, magazine programs, discussions and interviews. But I'd like to see even more, even within our newscasts, some greater element of the texture and background of an event or issue and not only the unadorned fact or event. And by that I certainly do not mean opinion or editorializing--the CBC has no business editorializing. I mean the factual background setting of which a contemporary event or issue is only the surface reality.

Well, these are only a few of the issues which journalists and journalistic organizations must address when articulating their standards and policies. But they illustrate, I think, the importance of such standards and policies both to good journalism, and to public confidence in the media.

My third prescription or guidepost for socially responsible journalism relates to public complaints about taste, content and standards. These, it seems to me, must be dealt with by the individual journalistic organization through an adequate internal review process.

We in the CBC have recently begun experimenting with a new approach in responding to such complaints. I frankly feel it's just not good enough for us to brush off those who write to us with their concerns with a brief "Thank you and we're sorry you didn't like it" defensive answer. Occasionally I'm afraid we do. I think serious and well-reasoned complaints from the public merit a serious reply. We are experimenting with an internal ombudsman-type of process whereby significant and thoughtful complaints are examined in very considerable detail, with the complaint measured against the program and the program measured against our policies and standards. And if we find we have made a mistake, we'll admit it. If we don't think we have, we'll reply in detail and send along a copy of those policies so our answer can be evaluated against our policies.

If our public remains dissatisfied, we have a Board of Directors whose members are appointed from the public at large, and which finally must ensure that our answers are indeed full and fair.

My fourth prescription deals with charges of misrepresentation or unfair treatment as distinct from the complaints about taste, content and standards which I've just mentioned. These more specific complaints from the public require another approach. The print medium has press councils, as in Quebec, Ontario and Alberta, which hear such complaints. For broadcasting in Canada there is no equivalent, except that the Quebec Press Council does include French-language radio and television. I believe a Broadcast Complaints Commission should be established for radio and television as a kind of independent public watchdog, if you will, to hear public complaints about misrepresentation or unfair treatment. Such a commission should be chaired by a distinguished representative of the public, and membership should include representatives of the public and the journalistic community. Obviously the members would have to be people with high credibility both to the public and to broadcasters.

People who feel aggrieved by unfair treatment or misrepresentation could raise their complaint with the broadcasting organization or with the Broadcast Complaints Commission. Members of the commission would hear the complaints, make judgements and publish their comments.

The power of sanction would remain with the broadcasters concerned since they must in the final analysis remain responsible and be held responsible for their programming. But I have no doubt that such a commission could have a significant influence on the broadcasting industry. Our own experience in the CBC bears witness to this. We, for example, were criticized by the Quebec Press Council for one of the items in the program *Le Soixante*, and I know that this experience conditioned us to be more careful and more rigorous in the application of our journalistic standards.

My fifth prescription for socially responsible journalism involves taking the public into our confidence. We must make sure the public is aware of exactly what our policies and standards are. As I have said, without that awareness, the public has no real way of measuring our performance. Some newspapers, indeed, such as *The Toronto Star* with Borden Spears, try to achieve this through a kind of ombudsman-like column dealing with reader concerns and delineating both policy and performance relative to those concerns.

What we must do, it seems to me, is to evaluate our fairness and balance and thoroughness--along with the public. And we should explain how our journalistic decisions are made and within what constraints of time, money, facilities and available knowledge. And we should listen carefully to the various public perceptions of the impact of our decisions.

At the CBC we've begun this process of evaluation with a seminar just a couple of weeks ago at Trent University in Peterborough involving the key national editorial decision-makers in the CBC and a number of articulate and leading Canadian citizens. And we plan to have more such seminars across the country over the next year.

There are other kinds of public forums where CBC decision-makers can discuss issues that concern citizens, also a part of taking the public into our confidence. We are planning a pilot project, hopefully over the next year, in two regions of the country.



Journalistic Freedom and Responsibility
A.W. Johnson

Broadcasters and teachers, farmers and factory workers, white collar workers and individuals from any profession will discuss openly and frankly their concerns. We plan to broadcast these public forums on radio--eventually perhaps on television--and at the conclusion of each forum we will take telephone calls from the listening audience. I plan personally to participate in this project along with senior corporate officers so we can have serious public discussion of public concerns. Well, these are the five guideposts I would advocate for socially responsible journalism. They may not be a miracle cure, but they do provide, I believe, for a heightened sense of our own integrity in the media, as well as a foundation for greater public confidence in the media. Even with all of this, even with full public support, the media will always be on trial and we will continuously be called upon to justify our activities. We can never expect to have a tension-free relationship between the media and the different elements of society. For the media, in doing their job of reflecting reality, will always cause sparks, touch nerves, reflect and reveal what we as individuals sometimes would prefer not to know or to see. In a decision in the Pentagon Papers case in the United States, Judge Gurfein put it better than I can do: "A cantankerous press, an obstinate press, a ubiquitous press must be suffered by those in authority in order to preserve the even greater values of freedom of expression and the right of the people to know."

But let us be certain that when we in the media cause tensions, strike sparks, we do so for the right reason, because we are doing our essential job of informing the public, and not for the wrong reason, because we are failing to meet our own standards of accuracy, fairness, thoroughness and balance.

May I conclude with a personal word about journalism generally, and one about journalism in the CBC. I have come to develop, in my two years as President of the CBC, a great respect for the journalistic profession, and the high purposes it serves. It is a tough, and grinding and proud profession. We in Canada owe much to those who are prepared to ply this trade.

About journalism in the CBC I want to be even more personal. Journalism in the CBC is the object of much criticism. And why not. We are in everyone's home, and everyone owns us. But when you meet CBC journalists as a group, as I did recently at our Peterborough seminar, and hear and perceive their sense of commitment to the public purposes they serve, you see why the CBC enjoys the very high reputation it does in broadcasting circles around the world for the outstanding quality of its news and information programming.

This is not to say that we rest content: we know where we are on the road to excellence, and we are determined to pursue our way along that road with all the determination at our command. That is why I chose today to talk about journalism in Canada, and to speak as candidly about it as I have tried to do.

Thank you.

The appreciation of the audience was expressed by Sir Arthur R. T. Chetwynd, Bt., a Past President of The Empire Club of Canada.

