

Governance Lunch Debate on 16 May 2001
Meeting with Mr Charles Lewis, Founder and Director of the Centre for Public Integrity in Washington DC

Mr. Charles Lewis is the founder of the investigative research organisation Center for Public Integrity. In 1997 he launched the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. The idea of the International Consortium is to bring together high level journalists from several countries in a wide world network. So far, the consortium is best known in the US for its politician investigations. In an increasingly frontierless yet complex world, the consortium's mission is to meet the growing need for in-depth information that transcends national boundaries. Press reporting and media coverage increasingly impact on policy-making. Mr. Lewis addressed the lunch debate participants on the press subject and the role of journalism in an era of globalisation and search for adequate European and global governance.

To Mr. Lewis' point of view, the state of media is not very good at the moment. The quality of investigating journalism is getting lower. The reason to why Mr. Lewis created the International Consortium was public integrity around the world. The media situation varies from country to country, but the ethic standards must be high, clearly understood and respected by the journalists working for the consortium. The journalists of the consortium work in all five different continents.

The big paradox of media today is the state of media and the need for action on one hand and on the other hand the fact that news organisations get less and less commitments financially. Globalisation getting more and more important, the only way to cover the news flow is to start cooperating with colleagues in other countries. Today you get nowhere without the international aspect, and international networks become a growing issue.

Mr. Lewis brought up the issue of trust. We are living in a strange time where no one trusts anyone anymore. That is a serious problem and media are being part of it. In the US the elections of year 2000 were covered half as much as the previous. Nowadays you must pay to be seen. Media are profiting from democracy not covering it. The alternative media based on the new information technologies constitute another part of the trust issue. How can we prevent corruptive information from going through there ? How can we make sure the trust building ? Are citizenship initiatives the way to go ?

The media get very powerful through their lobbying. They get to control the political face on TV. The governments of the nationstates get less aggressive and there is a vacuum to be filled. The global mechanisms are not in place when we do not trust our governments and do not regulate cooperations.

How to deal with media is an issue for Brussels. Fewer and fewer people own the world media. The public media is worrying. You can get so much information from home and the financial support starts to lack. There is a domination through the web as well. The major sites are cross-platforming. To get everyone's attention through diffusion of information is difficult. The technology is important but there needs to be more than that.

Questions and remarks

- *The role of the market. We are living in a market fundamentalism where media are common goods. How to bring in the social responsibility ?*

We do not need more regulation. Publishing is in a crisis, both because of fear of litigation and financial problems. Only « markettable » things are published and reading is going down.

- *How is the center funded ? Is there an ethic code ? How are people selected ?*

The center is individually funded through 30 foundations. There is an employee manual with strict rules. And there are formal systems of selection making the process quite competitive and intense. The consortium has its own news organisations. People have different backgrounds, they get recommended and some work on freelance basis. They must be English speaking. The idea is to get less US centric. The criteria for selection are getting more serious.

- *Do media manipulate public opinion ?*

They do, but how ? Manipulate is not telling the truth about certain institutions. Every country has its taboo, which is quite normal.

- *The use of internet reduces social conscienceness since you can use it to just verify your own opinions.*

There are customised news even in the newspapers.

- *Is there a content control body ?*

No, not in the US, but presidency commissions are created.

- *How to bring in civil society and NGOs ? Media is more than government. Is it a question of transparency ?*

Studies are made about thinktanks and NGOs. There is a group in New York analysing non-profit groups and civil rights movements. In Washington the transparency issue is an interesting political issue.

- *Is there any work on agencies for public interest ?*

As an example there is a study on food safety and what the Congress has done about it. Every state has got its agriculture record.

The moderator thanked Mr. Lewis for a very interesting contribution to the governance lunch debate.