



DEMOCRACY AND THE MEDIA:



*The Ineluctable Connection
between Democracy and
the Quality of Journalism*

Report of the Commission on the
Media and Democracy in Central America

May 2005



The Inter-American Dialogue

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Proposal for the Formation of a Forum on the Media and Democracy*

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FOREWORD

This report of the Commission on the Media and Democracy in Central America reflects the consensus of more than thirty media owners, editors and leading reporters, who met from September 17 to 19, 2004 in Antigua, Guatemala to seek ways to enhance the contribution of journalism to democracy in the region. The assembled group unanimously approved a blueprint for establishing the Central American Forum on the Media and Democracy, which would work to develop new ethical and quality standards for the news media, improve the training of reporters, editors, and publishers, and strengthen investigative reporting in the region.

The Inter-American Dialogue is pleased to have facilitated preparation of the Commission's report, which was drafted by Columbia University journalism professor John Dinges, formerly of *The Washington Post* and NPR. Dialogue senior associate Manuel Orozco worked with Central American media leaders from the outset in developing this initiative, and other Dialogue staff members, Michelle Lapointe and Gillian Morejon, participated in organizing the Commission and the Guatemala conference. We are grateful for the support of the Danish Government's Program for Human Rights in Central America (PRODECA), and for the hard work of its program officers Klavs Wolff and Finn Rasmussen.

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THE CHALLENGE OF JOURNALISM IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

This report and proposal are the result of more than three years of intense consultation among major leaders of news organizations in Central America and reflects their broad consensus that sustained efforts to improve the quality of journalism in their media outlets are among the most fundamental contributions to the strengthening of democracy in the region. The Commission on Media and Democracy in Central America began working systematically in 2003. It conducted a series of meetings and consultations in each of the five Central American countries, designed to advance the dialogue in the region about the critical relations between democracy and the media. Conclusions of the meetings were supplemented by in-depth interviews to assemble the opinions of fifty-two additional media owners and others exercising lead-



Fabricio Altamirano, John Dinges

"Sustained efforts
to improve the
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democracy."

ership in the profession. The consultations focused in particular on questions of improving the quality of journalistic activity and enhancing the contribution of news organizations to the democratic practice of national and regional communities.

At the heart of this effort is the recognition that media organizations can and must achieve economic success as they carry out their fundamental duty of informing an active citizenry, which is a prerequisite of a successful democratic society.

In the discussions and in the surveys, several topics and observations have stood out. The news media in Central America continue to enjoy strong respect and credibility among viewers, listeners and readers, but they cannot take for granted that this will always be the case. The news media in our countries are credited with playing a historic role in defending freedom of expression during periods of authoritarian governments and promoting the return to fuller democratic systems. Now that democratic governing structures are the general rule in our societies, we must pay special attention to what it means to be journalists and media owners within a democracy and to the ways we can contribute to and strengthen democratic institutions, which themselves are sometimes weak and in the process of consolidation. In this new situation, the media confront often contradictory criticism from those who wish to influence them. Governments, on the one hand, often complain bitterly that media criticisms are too harsh and negative and may even undermine trust in government performance. Other critics, in opposition circles, attack the media for not being critical enough. While the media is open to listening to such dueling criticism from all quarters, they recognize that the responsibility lies solely with themselves to develop the journalistic processes needed to produce fair, accurate and balanced coverage that will best serve the needs of citizens. That is the challenge that the Commission embraces: to propose concrete steps toward the continuing improvement in the quality of our news product and to remedy perceived problems in the practice of journalism, in the service of strengthening democracy.

The fundamental premise of our endeavor is that the news media must continue to speak as the foremost advocates of freedom of expression in our societies and to defend proactively against threats to a free and independent press whenever such threats

arise. In addition, we firmly believe that improving the quality of our journalistic products, whether in radio, television or print media, is the key to the success and effectiveness of our news organizations in the current era of democratic consolidation. Recognizing that the news media carry heavy responsibilities toward the effectiveness of democracy in our societies, the members of the Commission commit themselves to a course of action, both in their individual newsrooms and jointly in a regional institution designed to strengthen and improve journalistic practice and professional standards of journalistic quality and ethics.

It is in this spirit that the members of the Commission, in presenting this report, propose the creation of the Central American Forum on the Media and Democracy. The Forum is envisioned as a permanent regional institution, made up exclusively of news media owners and journalistic leaders, to carry out programs to improve the quality of the news media, achieve business success, and contribute to the practice of democracy.

This report lays out the Commission's strategic vision underlying the fundamental connection between journalism quality and the news media's ability to carry out their vital role in a democratic society. It describes the various activities and programs that such a regional organization of media leaders could undertake to achieve these goals, and proposes a plan of action to create the Forum and to guide it during its period of gestation.

STRATEGIC VISION OF THE CENTRAL AMERICAN FORUM ON THE MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

This proposal is grounded in recent reflections about and critiques of the role that journalists and the media play in the transition toward and consolidation of democracy.¹ It emerges from recent efforts of Central American media organizations to improve technical and business aspects of their enterprises and the growing awareness that investments in higher quality result in significant economic returns and increased consumer satisfaction. Moreover, the trend toward technical innovation and

"The news media carry heavy responsibilities toward the effectiveness of democracy."

¹ Elizabeth Fox and Silvio Waisbrod (eds), *Latin Politics, Global Media* (University of Texas Press, 2002). Rick Rockwell and Noreene Janus, *Media Power in Central America* (University of Illinois Press, 2003). Carlos Fernando Chamorro y Alberto Arene, *El Torno de los Medios: El Periodismo Centroamericano Frente a la agenda de la democratización* (Inter-American Dialogue, 2001).

“The media
represent the
public’s ‘right
to know’.”

more professional business models has been accompanied by the media’s desire to distance themselves from past political allies as well as the government, even when the government in power is aligned closely with the agendas of media owners. As one newspaper director commented, “We are trying to be more independent. We have found that our investigations have paid off in more readers and economic success.”

There is broad consensus on the critical role of free and independent media in a democracy. According to the architect of North American democracy, Thomas Jefferson, the accepted axiom is that democracy is not possible in the absence of a free press. “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without government,” he said, “I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” Adding, “But I should mean that every man should receive those papers, and be capable of reading them.”

In other words, it is not enough to consider the news media in the abstract, as if their mere existence were sufficient for a free society. We must look at how the news media function, their relationship to governing institutions and how the media are used by ordinary people. There is a positive responsibility, therefore, that the news media serve the needs of citizens that arise from democracy.

There are three fundamental aspects in considering the media’s specific contributions to the consolidation of democracy:

First and foremost, the media provide **information** needed by citizens to participate fully in the deliberations and decisions of public life, particularly the right to elect government representatives. This immediately raises the question of quality: Is the information complete? Does it come from diverse, relevant sources? Are the details accurate? Or did the reporter omit certain facts, skewing the report to favor one side or another? Is it simply incomplete, either intentionally, or because of inadequate reporting? The test of quality can be applied to each report as well as to the total information product of the news organization as a whole.

Another dimension of particular relevance is access to information. It is not uncommon in a democracy for a government to seek to restrict or control access to information. However, the media represent the public’s “right to know,” and thus act

in the interest of democracy when they pressure governments to expand free access to information or guarantee such access through laws and regulations.

Secondly, the news media exercise an indispensable investigative function on behalf of citizens as the “**watchdogs**” of government. They investigate the internal workings of government and expose graft and corruption when it occurs. There is in fact a symbiotic relationship in this regard between effective government and critical, independent media willing to investigate and expose. No government will earn the trust of its citizenry without the assurance provided by a watchdog press. Conversely, no news organization will deserve the credibility of its audience unless it demonstrates tough and independent oversight of government and other powerful institutions. Clearly not every media organization fulfills this role, and in every country there are media who are more “lapdogs” than watchdogs.

Unlike authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, democratic systems present a “target-rich environment” for investigative reporting because of the relative lack of restrictions on in-

‘There are media who are more ‘lapdogs’ than watchdogs.’



Rodrigo Madrigal, Joan Caivano

“The media also play a vital role in developing a democratic culture.”

formation and because corruption and malfeasance of office continue to be rampant. Unquestionably, investigative reporting requires a significant investment in terms of training reporters and editors and in providing the time and resources for long-term projects. It is because of this high cost, rather than the unwillingness to criticize governments, that many news organizations, especially electronic media, avoid investigative reporting and oversight projects. Nevertheless, the returns could not be higher, both for the strength of a functioning democracy and for the popularity and credibility of a news organization. In the surveys conducted by the Commission, improved investigative reporting was the journalistic function most often mentioned as indispensable for Central American media.

Third, the media are called upon to provide a **forum for public debate** for the wide-ranging exploration of opinion and alternatives in matters of public life. This debate, however, cannot be circumscribed to the voices of office holders, politicians and those exercising economic power. To be effective in a democracy, it must be opened to the participation of ordinary citizens, both to inform them and to act as a megaphone for their opinions. This is what the historic framers of democracy meant by such phrases as “The basis of our government [is] the opinion of people” (Jefferson). Information in a democracy flows in many directions: from government to the people (which the media cover most efficiently); from the people to the government (a dimension covered in the press only in moments of elections and in occasional opinion surveys); and from people to people (an element almost completely absent from most coverage). In other words, the media has the potential to facilitate communication among citizens paralleling the dialogue between governors and the governed.

In addition to informing the public by providing factual information, the media also play a vital role in developing a democratic culture. News media should promote the participation of readers and listeners in political coverage, rather than limiting coverage to the more sophisticated discussion in professional political circles—as has traditionally been the case. By promoting public participation and awareness media outlets will engender the loyalty of their audience.²

Historical Context

In the debate about an effective transition to democracy little attention has been paid to the central role of the news media in supporting such change. As a member of the Commission commented, “in the decade that has just begun, it is the media’s turn” to appear on the agenda of institutional reform.³

The news media emerged from the authoritarian period with high levels of credibility and popularity among the general public. In a 1996 survey, only priests and teachers ranked above the news media in earning the public trust, and government and military institutions had the trust of the smallest pluralities of citizens.⁴ The news media were credited for resisting the restrictions of the authoritarian governments and for taking a strong leadership role in pushing for the return to democracy. For our purposes, it is important to note that during the period of authoritarian rule the media were severely restricted in carrying out the “democratic” functions mentioned above. Once constitutional rule was reestablished, the media have new and more intense responsibilities with regard to democracy. Thus the role of the news media is qualitatively different during periods, such as the present, of democratic consolidation as compared to periods of authoritarian regimes.

It would be a mistake to assume, however, that political democracy automatically creates a democratic media. Technological change and the influence of market economics (liberalization) are factors that can either foster or hinder the development of democratic media. For example, the growing economic strength of corporations that own news media outlets allows the media to act with greater political independence and makes them less vulnerable to government pressure. On the other hand, the concentration of media ownership can reduce the diversity of coverage and lead to greater emphasis on ratings rather than journalistic quality.

“The media have new and more intense responsibilities under democracy, compared to periods of authoritarian rule.”

² The “public forum” dimension of mass media is discussed in a growing body of literature devoted to the journalism reform movement known as “civic journalism,” which has spread throughout the United States and in many Latin American countries in the 1990s. See David Matthews, *Política para la gente* (Biblioteca Jurídica Diké: Medellín, 1994).

³ *El turno de los medios: El periodismo centroamericano frente a la agenda de la democratización*, op cit.

⁴ PNUD, Informe Latinobarometro, 1996, question #55.

“Journalism during times of transition and consolidation of democracy requires high levels of journalistic quality, professionalism and ethical standards.”

The Current Challenge

This underscores the need for a careful, considerate and intelligent process of change directed by media leaders mindful of the fundamental importance of maintaining quality and professionalism. The owners, editors and reporters authoring this proposal have thus made explicit such a commitment, namely to fully realize the potential of their media organizations to support democracy while ensuring their own economic health.

What elements are significant when considering the most effective strategy to accomplish these goals? It is the clear conclusion of the Commission that journalism during times of transition and consolidation of democracy requires high levels of journalistic quality, professionalism and ethical standards.

These higher standards of professional performance required by democracy are evident in all three areas of news media functioning: in providing **information** for an empowered citizenry; in the task of **investigative reporting** and oversight to ensure honest government performance and to expose corruption; and in the creation of a **forum** for participation and the exchange of diverse opinions among leaders and ordinary citizens.

Investment and systematic efforts to improve journalistic quality by implementing high professional and ethical standards will pay off by strengthening the credibility of news media, and in turn serving the consolidation of democratic societies.

There are many possible routes to implementing this strategy. Outsiders to the profession have envisioned new laws outlining standards for journalistic performance as a way to ensure that the media fulfill their public service responsibility. Such legislatively imposed regulatory regimes have been proposed in one form or another in many countries and even in multinational forums. Needless to say, such initiatives have been universally rejected by journalists and media owners in almost all countries, and have been implemented—tellingly—only by authoritarian regimes which use the regulations to control the press.

Another route often is the idea of self-enforcement of standards or self-regulation. In some cases, however, it must

be recognized that “self-enforcement” is another word for no enforcement at all. At best, allegiance to self-enforcement in the absence of any structure other than reliance on the individual conscience of editors and reporters leads to vastly divergent practices and uneven quality from one news organization to another.

At the heart of this matter is a constitutional paradox: the basic laws of most free countries give special protections and rights to the news media because of their indispensable role in democracy. Yet any laws setting standards or regulations to require the news media to fulfill that responsibility are seen, at least by journalists, as contradictory to the very essence of press freedom itself.

Similarly, journalists and news organizations resist the notion that outside organizations, such as academic institutions or so-called “media watchdog” organizations should carry out the function of media oversight. Experiments in formation of “national media councils” of qualified media experts chosen by the news media themselves have gained some acceptance, but the idea has spread to few countries.

While the news media reject regimes of government regulation, they do not reject the idea of media responsibility itself. They recognize that while not accountable to any form of government regulation the news media must be accountable to the citizens who are their readers, listeners and viewers. One of the central insights in the current proposal is the realization that it is far better for the media to create internal mechanisms of their own to ensure quality, define standards, and promote professionalism than it is to wait in a defensive crouch as the criticism from outsiders grows and the pressure for externally imposed regulation mounts.

It is our conviction that it is possible and necessary to design a structure and a process to accomplish the critical dual goal of improving media quality and strengthening democracy. The organization proposed by the Commission, the **Central American Forum on the Media and Democracy**, is envisioned as a regional structure to begin this historic task.

“While the news media reject government regulation, they do not reject the idea of media responsibility.”

APPENDIX A

PLAN OF ACTION FOR THE CENTRAL AMERICAN FORUM ON THE MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

“The core mission of the Forum will be to improve the quality of journalism in the news organizations of its members.”

The Commission proposes that the new organization carry out the course of action outlined below:

1. Goals and objectives of the Central American Forum on the Media and Democracy

There is broad consensus among Commission members and others about the nature and mission of this new organization. The Forum is an entity for bringing together media owners and journalists who seek to improve the contribution of the communications media to strengthening democracies in Central America.

The distinguishing characteristics of the Forum are:

- ▶ The organization is grounded in an explicit commitment to the values of democratic society and the role of news media therein. The Forum will endeavor to offer an open space for the discussion and deliberation of problems affecting the news media and democracy.
- ▶ The core mission of the Forum will be to improve the quality of journalism in the news organizations of its members. To accomplish this, the immediate priority identified by the Commission is to facilitate regional programs for professional training and to create positive incentives to remedy deficiencies in basic journalism education.
- ▶ The Forum, as an entity for reflection and self-evaluation, is not designed to control the media, or to channel outside criticism of the media. The Forum’s recommendations will be formed exclusively at the discretion of its members.
- ▶ It will be composed and directed exclusively by individuals engaged in the profession of journalism, whether in print or electronic media. All decisions and activities of the organization will be under the direct control of representatives of the

media—that is by owners, top editors and journalists. Its activity encompasses the Central American region as well as the individual countries.

- The Forum will promote standards of professional quality and ethical practice. The Forum will compile the highest accepted expressions of standards and best practices, which it will publish in the form of statements of principles and guides to professional practice. The Forum will support freedom of expression in the region and defend it against threats.
- The Forum will design and implement programs and activities to achieve its objectives of improving media quality and enhancing democracy. An important element in the Forum's mission is to create positive incentives for high quality journalism and to give public recognition in the form of prizes and awards to those who achieve it.

2. Activities and methodology of the Forum

There is agreement that the Forum should not be a debating society, but should directly confront crucial news media issues with training, statements of principles, and mechanisms to study

“The Forum will promote standards of professional quality and ethical practice.”



Cristiana Chamorro, Manuel Orozco

“No other area of potential Forum activity received more frequent and impassioned comment than the need for newsroom training.”

the performance of the news media. The basic approach will be to call attention to and applaud “best practices,” rather than to single out media that do not follow the standards adopted by the Forum.

Much of the activity of the Forum will consist of commissioning analysis and studies, including surveys of journalists and readers/viewers, and content analysis of news media products. The research will be oriented toward informing Forum members about ways to remedy deficiencies through custom-designed training programs and other journalistic educational activities.

Only elected leaders of the new organization will be authorized to set the agenda of activities. Nevertheless, the following are the most evident areas of activity identified by the members of the Commission to date:

a. Newsroom training

No other area of potential Forum activity received more frequent and impassioned comment during interviews by Commission members.

The Forum will approach training with a new strategic vision: training programs will be oriented to achieving the kind of quality that will strengthen the aspects of journalism that most directly support our democratic role, namely information, oversight, and openness to the public.

The Forum will not be a training institution as such. But more importantly it will use its resources to identify specific professional training needs and to serve as facilitator and liaison with training institutions and university programs to design workable solutions. The Forum will take an active role in designing and commissioning training courses and developing innovative cooperative systems to finance them and make them available to members. Professional training will stress courses of value to mid-career journalists and newsroom managers. Examples include: training in copy editing, newsroom management, management of reporters, in addition to traditional courses aimed at improving basic skills of writing and reporting. Advanced courses would include developing expertise in coverage of areas such as financial reporting, legal reporting, science, and education. Training programs designed to make investigative techniques part of everyday reporting will be a staple of the Forum’s agenda.

Ethics and professionalization training is also in constant demand. Courses will emphasize practical application to newsroom decision-making under deadline pressure. Their approach will show the continuum among ethical principles and the quality standards of professional journalism. New areas of training would be developed in line with recent interest in establishing readers' advocates and "ombudsman" positions in news organizations.

The Executive Committee decided that the most important activity for the Forum to pursue in the first year would be to design and implement a newsroom training course for editors and directors. The course would emphasize ethics and professionalism while strengthening the aspects of journalism that most directly support democracy—namely information, investigation, and openness to the public.

To fund the course, a proposal will be written to detail a two-stage process: the design of the curriculum, and the actual training. Preparation and design of the course will be an extensive process lasting approximately two months and requiring input from the newsrooms of each media outlet that is a member of the Forum. Central to this preparation would be a detailed survey to identify problems and strengths in the newsroom as indicated by current editors and directors. Based

"The aspects of journalism that most directly support democracy are information, investigation, and openness to the public."



Djenane Villanueva, Dina Fernández

“Studies will be commissioned on the kinds of journalistic practices that best serve the consolidation of democracy.”

on the survey, a consultant would take about one month to design the course so that it addresses specific problems and builds on recognized strengths. The final result would be a “traveling course” administered by an instructor that would give three weeks of courses in newsrooms in four countries over a period of about four months.

b. Content analysis studies

Studies and analysis will be commissioned on ethical issues and professional standards. Of particular interest, especially in early activities, will be studies of the kinds of journalistic practices that best serve the consolidation of democracy in the three areas of information, oversight, and forums for diverse public opinion. This will be the area of distinct comparative advantage for the new institution since no other journalistic organization conducts such professional analysis.

The Commission has already designed a content analysis survey that was carried out by the research firm, Borge and Associates, to examine the relationship of certain areas of coverage to the consolidation of democracy. The study examines coverage in all five countries, in radio, television and newspapers, of topics fundamental to democracy, including corruption, politics, economy, excluded groups, and justice. The study is designed to measure indicators of quality (impartiality, integrity, clarity of

writing, use of sources, and investigative journalism). Preliminary results were distributed at the meeting in Antigua, Guatemala in September 2004 and the final analysis is available on the Inter-American Dialogue web site (www.thedialogue.org).

Future research projects will be conducted using case studies on the ways media and democratic institutions interact.



Mauricio Funes

c. Identification of standards, self-evaluation and self-enforcement

The Forum will endeavor to compile and draft practical standards of journalistic quality and ethical guidelines. Where basic standards exist and are of wide acceptance among journalists in newsrooms, the Forum will work to draw more explicitly the connections between the standards and the practice of journalism that serves democracy. This crucial task should take place as part of a participative process of Forum members early in the Forum's existence. It will constitute the most important groundwork for the future activities of the organization.

Active members will be called upon to endorse the standards and guidelines as internal policy guiding their newsroom practice and will announce the guidelines and procedures to make sure they are adhered to by all elements of the news organization.

Interviews by Commission members make clear that there is broad consensus on the fundamental principles that will form the basis of more detailed compilations of ethical norms and measures of journalistic excellence in the newsroom.

These principles include:

- ▶ *Rigor, accuracy and completeness in reporting facts.*
- ▶ *Fairness and freedom from bias in presentation of facts and analysis. Balance in the choice and use of sources. Active pursuit of diverse and authoritative sources to complement official (government) sources.*
- ▶ *Independence from allegiances to political or economic agendas and resistance to pressures from those who promote such agendas.*
- ▶ *Clarity in writing, so that journalistic reports are intelligible to the general public and not oriented only to specialized or insider audiences.*
- ▶ *Investigative techniques as a part not only of special projects but as a characteristic of daily reporting. This crucial quality includes in-depth reporting, critical and broad-ranging questioning, pursuit of all relevant points of view, and mastery of specialized subject areas.*

"The Forum will work to draw more explicitly the connections between standards and the practice of journalism that serves democracy."

“Graduates of university programs that purport to prepare aspiring journalists know neither the practical aspects of journalism nor the academic basics.”

- *Self-evaluation. Finally, there is recognition that these principles will have little force if the news organization does not establish a process of self-reflection and self-monitoring to ensure that they are translated into high quality performance by journalists in their everyday work.*

More detailed statements of journalism principles have been developed by respected journalism organizations in recent years and will serve as references for the decisions of the Forum.

d. University programs in communications

Another often expressed concern focused on the perceived deficiencies of existing university programs that purport to prepare aspiring journalists. One radio news director said the academic approach at many universities is “totally mistaken.” Not only are graduates poorly prepared for the daily work of a journalist, but they possess only the most superficial grasp of the information and concepts needed for news work. A television news director said that years of university specialization in “communications” leaves aspiring journalists with a severe lack of the essential intellectual equipment for the profession: they know neither the practical aspects of daily journalism nor the academic basics of subjects like history, politics, economics or language.

Ideas to remedy this situation vary widely, but there is consensus that news organizations should work together in a regional institution like the Central American Forum on the Media and Democracy to pursue cooperation with local universities and training institutions. The creation of the Forum opens the possibility of forming a united front of news organizations taking an active role in diagnosing training problems and proposing solutions.

e. Activities directly related to the consolidation of democracy

The most obvious link between good democratic government and the media is in the media’s investigative function. The Forum will immediately focus on ways to strengthen journalistic functions that most directly benefit effective democratic systems, such as the oversight or “watchdog” role for the press vis-à-vis both the government and the private sector.

The Forum will promote programs intended to help its news organization members improve communication with the public.

The organization calls itself “Forum” precisely because it sees itself as a direct channel of communication between the public and the media who serve them. Until now this relationship has been regulated—to the detriment of good communication—by media critics and civic organizations with their own agendas for what the media should cover and how they should cover it. The Forum broadly understands its function as establishing a public venue for discussion on the revitalization of the media, where the ordinary public, civic leaders, and all those interested in the issue of quality journalism can express their views.

The existence and activities of the Forum will allow media organizations to move beyond the purely defensive posture that has until now characterized their reaction to external criticism. Notable activities include the installation of ombudsmen, readers’ columns, and other mechanisms intended to establish more direct contact between the media and the public. Internal systems of self-evaluation and self-regulation will stimulate improved quality and project the message that the media is seriously determined to better serve the cause of democracy, allowing the media to better respond to criticism.

Ultimately, the activities of the Forum support the strengthening of democracy simply by improving the quality of information and openness in society. Certain activities are designed to provide in-depth examination of the mechanisms of interaction

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Eduardo Enríquez, Hugo Holman Chamorro

“The setting of standards implies creating incentives to fulfill them.”

between democratic institutions, representative government bodies, and the communications media. This will include improving “civic journalism” techniques developed in recent years to raise the profile of citizens in political coverage. Press, radio and television organizations in some Latin American countries have jointly sponsored opinion surveys and public meetings to discuss political issues that have been successful and constitute an interesting area of possible collaboration among Forum members.

f. Prizes and incentives

The setting of standards implies creating incentives to fulfill them. These incentives, including prizes to media organizations and individual journalists, constitute a public demonstration of media accountability. One of the eventual activities of the new organization will be to establish prizes in the most important areas of journalistic endeavor in the region. In addition to prizes for investigative reporting and most effective oversight, the Forum could target criteria and prizes for news organizations that demonstrate excellence in journalistic values such as balance in coverage of controversial topics, openness to readers and audience, progress in promoting freedom of information, and presence of the public in political coverage.

3. Membership

In creating its membership structure, the Forum considered the examples of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), which restricts membership to the top editors of major news organizations, and the Inter American Press Association (IAPA), which achieves a more open membership structure by creating several tiers of members. (See Ladisch research paper on the Inter-American Dialogue website for a description of membership criteria used by those organizations.) The two models provide the elements for a viable structure for the Forum. Membership in the Forum can be relatively open using a tiered system, while preserving the decision-making power in the hands of active journalists.

The Forum agreed on the following model:

Active membership, with full voting rights, would be limited exclusively to media owners, directors, editors and journalists employed in news media. This type of membership structure

would ensure that persons who do not have a full stake in the enterprise of news media would not have decision-making power within the organization.

Associate membership will include: academics, professors of journalism, organizations and associations related to the news media industry. This category of membership can be relatively open but should not include individuals and organizations whose main purpose is to influence press coverage (advisors, politicians, government officials, public relations officials).

The Forum will seek to establish mechanisms to accommodate civil society organizations and NGOs. They are important stakeholders in the quality of the media and their voices are important. But there is a conflict of interest in having them as full voting members of the organization since inevitably one of their goals would be to lobby the members and their organizations to give (favorable) coverage to their issues of interest.

Within this structure, it is important that membership conveys benefits and responsibilities. Members have the benefit of participating in and planning training programs tailored to their newsroom needs. And an important intangible benefit of membership will be the enhanced credibility and prestige conveyed by association with the Forum. If the organization is to become known for the high quality of its membership, it must have a mechanism to ensure that members commit themselves to the levels of quality endorsed by the organization.

4. Structure and functioning

The Commission agreed to the following governing structure:

Full members of the organization elect an Executive Committee. The Committee will be made up of nine members—three will be media owners and three will be top ranking editors or news directors. These six members will serve in representation of their media organizations. The remaining three members of the Executive Committee will be prominent journalists serving in a personal capacity. Selection of the Executive Committee will take into account diversity of medium (radio, television and newspapers) as well as national representation. (The Executive Committee was elected by the Forum at its first meeting in Antigua, Guatemala in September 2004. See the rapporteur's report in Appendix C.) The Committee shall meet several times per year

“Active membership would be limited exclusively to media professionals.”

“There is general agreement that an organization that is not self-sustaining will not succeed.”

to decide on activities and handle all other decisions, including fundraising, setting dues, etc.

The Executive Committee will hire and supervise the activities of an executive director, who will be in charge of day-to-day operations of the organization, including the planning and execution of Forum projects and activities. An office or secretariat will be established in one of the member countries and will be the base of operations for the Forum executive director and a small staff. Major projects will be staffed on a per-project basis by consultants.

The Forum will also select an individual to act as ombudsman or “readers’ advocate” for Central America. He or she would be a kind of “spiritual guide” of journalism in the region, and write a regular column that members of the Forum would commit to run in their newspapers. This person will have full freedom to address issues within the context of democracy and quality of journalism. The readers’ advocate would also receive comment and complaints from public, private and government sectors concerning the press.

In order to set ethical guidelines and professional standards to be used and promoted by the Forum, an annual or biennial membership meeting should be considered as a venue for these ideas to be explored, for studies to be examined, and recommendations to be formulated.

The general consensus is that the organization should have one main office as well as collateral offices in each country. Also, the Forum should avoid a complex international structure and frequent international meetings, because of cost. Instead, a simple structure, with minimal infrastructure and permanent staff, would allow the Forum to direct its funds to programmatic activities.

5. Financing

The Forum will be financed through a combination of members’ dues and grants from international organizations. There is general agreement that an organization that is not self-sustaining will not succeed. In addition there is nearly universal agreement that no funding should be accepted from Central American governments or political organizations.

Institutions with charter membership will be asked to provide seed capital of \$5,000 that will be used as start-up funds for the Forum. These funds will be a sign of a media organization's commitment to the Forum and will guarantee participation in activities such as training. In the future, a sliding dues structure will ensure that fees correspond to the size of the organization.

Associate members and individual journalists who participate in the Forum with the support of their media outlet would pay symbolic membership dues of \$100, adjustable according to ability to pay. The Forum should require (or strongly recommend) that news organizations pay the dues for its employees who wish to be individual members.

Several ideas were discussed as to how to balance grant funding and dues. Under one scenario, dues should cover all institutional costs (fixed costs), while grants would be used only for projects and programmatic activities.

Dues structure and financial planning will be the responsibility of the Executive Committee. In the first year of operation, the Forum will seek transitional funding from international organizations. It is estimated that initial costs of operation will be approximately \$5,000 to \$7,000 per month for the first year. That will be sufficient to set up the secretariat with a small paid staff.

IMPLEMENTATION AND TIMELINE

1. The Forum was established by unanimous resolution of the regional meeting convened by the Commission in Antigua, Guatemala, September 17 to 19, 2004. An Executive Committee was elected and held its first meeting following the adjournment of the general meeting. At that meeting the participants approved the plan of action.
2. Eligible participants in the Antigua meeting now constitute full members of the new Forum. (See Appendix D.)
3. Meeting participants agreed on a general plan of programs and activities for the inaugural year of the new organization. These include:
 - a. Drafting of a guide for ethics, journalistic standards of professional quality, and style. (Six months)

"Eligible participants in the Antigua meeting now constitute full members of the new Forum."

- b. Research and analysis. The study by Borge and Associates, “One Week in the Central American Press. Content Analysis,” includes a content analysis of 10 newspapers, 10 radio stations and 10 television stations from Central America over a week’s period. The preliminary report was presented at the conference in Antigua, and the final report is available on the Inter-American Dialogue website.
 - c. Design of training programs and topics will be set by the Executive Committee. An initial topic—recommended by the Commission—is newsroom management, with coverage of practical topics: use of resources, assignment of reporters, coordinated planning of coverage (short and medium term), and editing for quality control. The design timeframe for the course will be eight months.
 - d. Immediate creation of traveling team of instructors in investigative skills and oversight.
- 4. A second meeting of the Executive Committee took place in Antigua, Guatemala, on October 22, 2004.
 - 5. The first order of business of the Executive Committee will be the organization of the Secretariat, hiring of an Executive Director, establishment of a headquarters in a member state, and drafting of funding proposals. The organization will need full operating funds for at least 12 months, after which self-generated revenues should begin.

APPENDIX B.1

A THEORY OF JOURNALISM IN NINE CORE PRINCIPLES

Project for Excellence in Journalism

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After extended examination by journalists themselves of the character of journalism at the end of the twentieth century, we offer this common understanding of what defines our work.

The central purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with accurate and reliable information they need to function in a free society. This encompasses myriad roles—helping define community, creating common language and common knowledge, identifying a community’s goals, heroes and villains, and pushing people beyond complacency. This purpose also involves other requirements, such as being entertaining, serving as watchdog and offering voice to the voiceless.

Over time journalists have developed nine core principles to meet the task. They comprise what might be described as the theory of journalism:

1. Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth.

Democracy depends on citizens having reliable, accurate facts put in a meaningful context. Journalism does not pursue truth in an absolute or philosophical sense, but it can—and must—pursue it in a practical sense. This “journalistic truth” is a process that begins with the professional discipline of assembling and verifying facts. Then journalists try to convey a fair and reliable account of their meaning, valid for now, subject to further investigation. Journalists should be as transparent as possible about sources and methods so audiences can make their own assessment of the information. Even in a world of expanding voices, accuracy is the foundation upon which everything else is built—context, interpretation, comment, criticism, analysis and debate. The truth, over time, emerges from this forum. As citizens encounter an ever greater flow of data, they have more need—not less—for identifiable sources dedicated to verifying that information and putting it in context.

“Democracy depends on citizens having reliable, accurate facts put in a meaningful context.”

“Credibility builds
a broad and loyal
audience... economic
success follows
in turn.”

2. Its first loyalty is to citizens.

While news organizations answer to many constituencies, including advertisers and shareholders, the journalists in those organizations must maintain allegiance to citizens and the larger public interest above any other if they are to provide the news without fear or favor. This commitment to citizens first is the basis of a news organization's credibility, the implied covenant that tells the audience the coverage is not slanted for friends or advertisers. Commitment to citizens also means journalism should present a representative picture of all constituent groups in society. Ignoring certain citizens has the effect of disenfranchising them. The theory underlying the modern news industry has been the belief that credibility builds a broad and loyal audience, and that economic success follows in turn. In that regard, the business people in a news organization also must nurture—not exploit—their allegiance to the audience ahead of other considerations.

3. Its essence is a discipline of verification.

Journalists rely on a professional discipline for verifying information. When the concept of objectivity originally evolved, it did not imply that journalists are free of bias. It called, rather, for a consistent method of testing information—a transparent approach to evidence—precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work. The method is objective, not the journalist. Seeking out multiple witnesses, disclosing as much as possible about sources, or asking various sides for comment, all signal such standards. This discipline of verification is what separates journalism from other modes of communication, such as propaganda, fiction or entertainment. But the need for professional method is not always fully recognized or refined. While journalism has developed various techniques for determining facts, for instance, it has done less to develop a system for testing the reliability of journalistic interpretation.

4. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.

Independence is an underlying requirement of journalism, a cornerstone of its reliability. Independence of spirit and mind, rather than neutrality, is the principle journalists must keep in

focus. While editorialists and commentators are not neutral, the source of their credibility is still their accuracy, intellectual fairness and ability to inform—not their devotion to a certain group or outcome. In our independence, however, we must avoid any tendency to stray into arrogance, elitism, isolation or nihilism.

5. It must serve as an independent monitor of power.

Journalism has an unusual capacity to serve as watchdog over those whose power and position most affect citizens. The Founders recognized this to be a rampart against despotism when they ensured an independent press; courts have affirmed it; citizens rely on it. As journalists, we have an obligation to protect this watchdog freedom by not demeaning it in frivolous use or exploiting it for commercial gain.

6. It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.

The news media are the common carriers of public discussion, and this responsibility forms a basis for our special privileges. This discussion serves society best when it is informed by facts rather than prejudice and supposition. It also should strive to fairly represent the varied viewpoints and interests in society, and to place them in context rather than highlight only the conflicting fringes of debate. Accuracy and truthfulness require that as framers of the public discussion we not neglect the points of common ground where problem solving occurs.

7. It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.

Journalism is storytelling with a purpose. It should do more than gather an audience or catalogue the important. For its own survival, it must balance what readers know they want with what they cannot anticipate but need. In short, it must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant. Quality is measured both by how much a work engages its audience and enlightens it. This means journalists must continually ask what information has most value to citizens and in what form. While journalism should reach beyond such topics as government and public safety, a journalism overwhelmed by trivia and false significance ultimately engenders a trivial society.

“Journalism must balance what readers know they want with what they cannot anticipate but need.”

“Journalism is a form of cartography: it creates a map for citizens to navigate society.”

8. It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.

Keeping news in proportion and not leaving important things out are also cornerstones of truthfulness. Journalism is a form of cartography: it creates a map for citizens to navigate society. Inflating events for sensation, neglecting others, stereotyping or being disproportionately negative all make a less reliable map. The map also should include news of all our communities, not just those with attractive demographics. This is best achieved by newsrooms with a diversity of backgrounds and perspectives. The map is only an analogy; proportion and comprehensiveness are subjective, yet their elusiveness does not lessen their significance.

9. Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

Every journalist must have a personal sense of ethics and responsibility—a moral compass. Each of us must be willing, if fairness and accuracy require, to voice differences with our colleagues, whether in the newsroom or the executive suite. News organizations do well to nurture this independence by encouraging individuals to speak their minds. This stimulates the intellectual diversity necessary to understand and accurately cover an increasingly diverse society. It is this diversity of minds and voices, not just numbers, that matters.

APPENDIX B.2

Latin American Journalism Center (CELAP)

www.celap.net

Recognizing that the principal function of journalism is to pursue and disseminate the truth about matters of public interest and to stand up for essential human values, and further recognizing this duty may only be discharged through independence, ethical behavior and unfettered use of the tools of the profession, the news organizations of Central America have adopted the following Statement of Principles in respect to the practice of our profession:

FIRST: Independence is indispensable to the practice of journalism in a manner that is consistent with the fundamental principles of the profession. It is also the best way to ensure accountability, as only truly independent media can be held to account for their actions.

To accomplish this, we pledge to:

(a) Oppose government restrictions on freedom of expression and the pursuit and publication of newsworthy information and opinion.

(b) Oppose all undue pressures from other sectors or individuals.

(c) Pursue information on behalf of the public and strive to fulfill the public's right to be informed about issues of societal interest.

SECOND: Other than that derived from legitimate business or professional activities, media owners, editors, journalists and managers must not accept or seek personal gain from their decision-making role regarding news content.

To maintain independence in matters of public import, media decision makers accepting public office or other positions that could call their impartiality into question should resign their media posts without delay.

THIRD: The news media must act in good faith, provide balanced coverage, treat individuals and institutions equitably, allow for the expression of all sides to any controversy, and always strive for accuracy.

"Independence
is indispensable
to the practice
of journalism."

“Striving for truth in media involves ensuring the expression of differing, and even conflicting, points of view.”

FOURTH: Without prejudice to our autonomy and independent editorial policies, we recognize that striving for truth in media involves ensuring the expression of differing, and even conflicting, points of view.

FIFTH: The news media have a duty to clearly separate news from editorial comment and advertising. This boundary should be readily evident to the public.

News and editorial decisions should be impervious to advertising pressures or criteria, and journalists should not be involved in commercial copywriting.

SIXTH: Conflict of interest must be avoided at all costs. The news media must alone defray the cost of coverage. These may be apportioned with sources only as an exception, and then only as long as editorial policy is not compromised and this fact is explained to the public.

Reporters must not conduct additional, for-profit activities that may detract from their integrity or impartiality. Any exception to this rule must be authorized by management.

We recognize that requiring transparency and integrity in turn require adequate compensation and working conditions. The new media must therefore strive to further the technical, ethical, and professional advancement of their staff.

SEVENTH: The news we deliver must be accurate to a fault. Errors must be promptly corrected. The prestige and credibility of the media will depend on their willingness to accept reader replies and corrections.

EIGHTH: As they research information, journalists must investigate and select the news professionally and ethically and shun improper methods. Journalists must always identify themselves as such except when anonymity may be the only way to obtain crucial information. They must name their sources and refrain from doing so only under extenuating circumstances. The public must be told of such decisions and sufficient independent corroboration sought and presented.

NINTH: The private lives of public figures and the public actions of private citizens are not to be deemed newsworthy except where the public interest is legitimately concerned.

TENTH: The news media must eschew profanity, vulgarity, coarseness and prejudiced or discriminatory references.

ELEVENTH: The media are accountable for the accuracy of the information they present. While this rule may not apply to advertising, misleading or clearly untrue advertising material should be avoided.

TWELFTH: Financial independence is instrumental to journalistic independence. The news media must therefore refrain from currying favor or privilege with public or private authorities, combat any resulting discrimination, and strive for efficiency and transparent financial and business practices.

New Orleans, June 12, 1993

“Financial
independence
is instrumental
to journalistic
independence.”

APPENDIX C

CENTRAL AMERICAN FORUM ON THE MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

Regional Meeting—Antigua, Guatemala

September 17 to 19, 2004

Rapporteur's Report by Michelle Lapointe

“Over 30 media leaders from the five Central American countries gathered to establish a regional forum on the media and democracy.”

Over 30 media leaders from the five Central American countries gathered on September 17 through 19 in Antigua, Guatemala, to establish a regional forum on the media and democracy. Representatives of various donor governments and international organizations also participated. The event, financed by the Danish government's program for human rights in Central America (PRODECA) and organized by the Inter-American Dialogue, brought together media owners, editors, and top reporters to discuss a blueprint for a permanent regional mechanism to improve the quality of the media and to strengthen its contribution to democracy. The two-day conference culminated in the formal installation of the Central American Forum on Media and Democracy, composed exclusively of media professionals in the region. The plan outlined in Antigua resulted from the deliberations of a Commission on the Media and Democracy in Central America that consulted with other media professionals in the region, commissioned an analysis of the quality of the media and a study of similar initiatives globally, and met a half dozen times over the past two years. Former *Washington Post* reporter and NPR editor John Dinges, now professor at the Columbia School of Journalism, served as consultant to the Commission and wrote its final report that was presented in Antigua. From this regional meeting, the Commission hoped to emerge with a commitment to the proposal from a wide sector of the Central American media community, and a clear plan of action for implementing the Forum.

The discussion was designed to reach consensus on a strategic vision for the Forum; on standards of media quality and principles of self-evaluation, and a related set of activities the Forum might undertake; and on the structure and financing of

the Forum. A final session was dedicated to electing an Executive Committee and planning the implementation of the Forum.

The weekend's proceedings opened with remarks by Rodrigo Madrigal Nieto, former foreign minister of Costa Rica and current president of FUNPADEM. He underscored the need for a free and independent press in Central America in this era of democracy. Madrigal Nieto noted that the press has an essential role to play to inform citizens of contradictory trends in the globalized world: a movement towards integration on the one hand and fractious forces on the other. He suggested that the Central American media has a responsibility not only to "orient" citizens to these changes, but also to examine closely, and help citizens understand the political structures in their countries and the prevalence of corruption. By guiding citizens to more effectively scrutinize political institutions and power brokers, the press can help confront threats to democracy in their countries.

Background and History of the Project

Cristiana Chamorro of Nicaragua offered a history of the initiative leading up to the Antigua forum. The idea of establishing a regional organization dedicated to improving media quality and strengthening its role in a democracy grew out of a May 2001 meeting of over 100 owners and editors of Central American media. As a result of this meeting, the Commission on Media and Democracy—composed of two media leaders from each of five Central American countries—was formed and met a half dozen times over the past two years. The Commission's deliberations were supplemented by the work of an Advisory Council, with three representatives from each country. The media leaders who formed the Commission share a common belief that a regional alliance of journalists working to defend democratic principles is the best way to promote democracy where it is lacking, to consolidate democracy where it already exists, and to ensure the financial sustainability of the media outlets themselves.

The Commission determined that the best way to further its goals would be to establish a more permanent body, the Central American Forum on Media and Democracy, to serve as a region-wide presence to carry out programs to improve

"Media leaders believe that a regional alliance of journalists working to defend democratic principles is the best way to promote democracy."

“An ongoing challenge for the Central American media is to preserve their prestige through active exercise of their power to investigate and inform.”

the quality of the news media, achieve business success, and contribute to the practice of democracy. Like the Commission, the Forum would be composed exclusively of media owners, editors, and journalists from Central America. Characteristics of the Forum that the Antigua meeting was designed to clarify include the functions and attributes of the Forum, standards that it would uphold, the profile of members, and the method of financing to make it self-sustainable.

Session 1: The Media in Times of Democracy: Strategic Vision of the Forum

John Dinges, author of the Commission’s final report that serves as a blueprint for the Forum, explained that the challenges currently facing the Central American media are distinct from those it confronted during the era of dictatorships and armed conflict. Currently, democracy is enshrined in the constitutions of each Central American country, but significant work remains in order to consolidate these gains in both the political institutions and among the citizenry. The media in Central America currently enjoy some of the highest levels of credibility and popularity among the general public, surpassed only by the Catholic Church and teachers, and far beyond governments and the military. One of the challenges for the Central American media in the coming years would be to preserve this prestige through active exercise of their power to investigate and inform.

Dinges noted that press freedom is a necessary condition for the proper functioning of democracy, but that this alone cannot guarantee that democracy flourishes. Healthy democracies require full citizen access to public information on the one hand, and confidence in the quality of the information presented by the media, on the other. The media working within a democracy needs to be sure that the information they offer is both accurate and complete. In addition, the media should perform a “watchdog” function over both the government and the private sector. Improved capacity for investigative reporting is a critical first step towards rigorous oversight of governments and economic powers in Central America. Finally, the media must provide a forum for public debate among a diverse array of ordinary citizens, and not just those with traditional access

to these outlets. Participation by a broad range of citizens is an essential element in the development of a democratic culture.

In order to perform these functions and fulfill their responsibilities in the context of democracy, the media leaders agreed that it is fundamental to promote journalistic professionalism in news rooms and on editorial boards. Improvements in professionalization go hand in hand with improvements in journalistic quality and adherence to ethical standards. The media leaders further agreed, however, that standards cannot be imposed from the outside; rather, it is the responsibility of the media to evaluate themselves and to scrutinize practices. How to judge media quality, and how to undertake meaningful self-evaluation occupied much of the initial discussion on the founding of the Forum.

Participants debated what should be included in the process of self-evaluation. Some insisted that media organizations extend the demand for transparency to their own organizations—in both the journalistic and financial arenas—as a means of improving accountability and public trust, and protecting the high level of credibility that the Central American media currently enjoy. To avoid creating an atmosphere of distrust or fear at the outset, one participant suggested that the forum recognize the importance of internal self-regulation as a means of maintaining moral authority, but that it gradually phase in the notion of developing standards. The idea would be to encourage a greater number of media organizations to support the goals of the Forum, rather than to alienate potential participants.

The media leaders emphasized the particular challenge of self-evaluation faced by broadcast news organizations, which are driven by the need to attract viewers, and often lean toward entertainment rather than programming designed to inform. Some questioned the extent to which self-evaluation could occur within any organization driven by the profit motive. Others noted that self-evaluation always occurs in practice within newsrooms. Overall, participants were unable to arrive at a consensus on the topic of self-evaluation, in terms of the scope and depth of the exercise, and how it should be incorporated into the Forum's work.

One proposal for encouraging quality journalism was for the Forum to award prizes for work that best demonstrates a con-

“Standards cannot
be imposed from
the outside.”

“Some participants rejected the notion of judging the print and electronic media by the same standard.”

tribution to democracy. This topic too generated protracted debate. By the end of the session, participants were in agreement on most of the Forum’s fundamental characteristics, including a commitment to democratic values and the essential role of the media in a democratic system; the importance of improving the quality of the media through professional training programs; the membership of the Forum being limited to media professionals; and the compilation and promotion of journalistic principles and standards.

Session 2: What are the Challenges in Terms of Media Quality?

During the second session of the conference, Victor Borge of the firm Borge & Associates presented a content analysis study, comparing the range of topics covered by TV, radio, and print media in each Central American country. The study was presented as an example of the type of work the Forum could carry out in evaluating media quality. It offered a quantitative look at the coverage of general topics related to the construction of democracy, such as political institutions, transparency and corruption, justice, and economic and gender issues. It also presented a more qualitative analysis of coverage, judging issues such as the exhaustiveness of the investigation, the number and origin of sources consulted in the reporting, and the accessibility of the reporting to the average citizen.

The study found that while the frequency of topics varied between countries, there were similar deficiencies in coverage among all. Participants generally agreed that the study was an important preliminary look at the treatment of topics in the Central American news media, but that it needed to be expanded to give a more comprehensive overview of trends in coverage (the original study looked at a one-week period). Some participants rejected the notion of judging the print and electronic media by the same standard, while others noted the importance of comparing the varying degree of comprehensiveness of coverage among the different media. Finally, participants pointed out that the study’s significance is based not only on the topics that are covered, but those that are absent—such as investigations on media concentration and the connections between media and political powers.

Session 3: Principles of Quality and Self-Evaluation— Concerns of the Forum

The third session of the conference was devoted to discussing the principles of quality and self-evaluation outlined in Dinges' proposal. Included in the materials distributed to participants were examples of codes of ethics from the Society of Professional Journalists, the Latin American Journalism Center (CELAP), and the Project for Excellence in Journalism. (See Appendices B.1 and B.2.) Many participants in the Antigua meeting helped draft the CELAP principles, and suggested using these as a basis for the Forum's own standards.

Participants noted that codes of ethics are useful, as long as they remain voluntary. But several expressed the need to move beyond codes of ethics towards a more practical application of these generally accepted standards. In addition, participants agreed that the promotion and circulation of standards and principles is critical. Participants stressed that the issue of training is linked to self-evaluation—just as journalists need to learn certain reporting skills, so too do publishers and editors need to be trained to think more about the quality of their product, rather than solely in terms of financial outcomes.

One participant suggested that the Forum establish a type of “shadow cabinet,” made up of non-media actors, who can offer an outside evaluation of the media as a supplement to the internal evaluation that the Forum will carry out. Others pointed out the importance of encouraging public debate on media quality so that there is greater exchange between media outlets on their experiences, and also more effective links between universities and the media. This could take the form of internships and other co-sponsored programs of professional training.

Some participants emphasized that the discussion of codes of ethics should focus on specific actions that the Forum could take in order to encourage media leaders to apply self-evaluation efficiently in their news organizations. One method, suggested in the Forum proposal, was to award prizes to promote quality journalism. Prizes could be awarded based on ethical principles and those journalistic practices that contribute most directly to democracy. Among the principles identified by Commission members and listed in the final report are accuracy and comprehensiveness of reporting, balanced use of sources, and

“Publishers and editors need to be trained to think more about the quality of their product, rather than solely in terms of financial outcomes.”

“Local radio stations are often the main source of news in communities, it is therefore critical that the Forum include small media outlets in its efforts.”

strong investigative techniques. Prizes could be awarded either through a decision of the executive committee or an open contest among news outlets.

Participants emphasized that the Forum think broadly about those practices that contribute to democracy—from oversight of government institutions and elected officials to efforts to bring overseas communities into political discussions in the home country through electronic media.

Participants also stressed the particular importance of disseminating codes of ethics and of offering training to smaller media outlets. Local radio stations—especially in rural parts of Central America—are often the main source of news in communities, and it is therefore critical that the Forum include small media outlets in its efforts to improve the overall quality of media in the region as a component of democratization.

There was significant disagreement on the effectiveness of awarding prizes. Some worried that it could overwhelm the Forum’s other activities and lead to unnecessary competition. Other participants were concerned that a prize system would reward those news organizations with the most resources. It was emphasized that prizes should be framed as a mechanism for promoting quality journalism and growth. In the end, participants agreed that the Forum needed first to adopt some form of standards, using those detailed in the proposal and the CELAP principles as a jumping-off point, and to revisit the issue of prizes at a later time.

Session 4: Structure and Financing of the Forum

The Executive Committee of the Forum as envisioned in the final report would be composed as follows: three owners, three editors, three journalists, and an executive director to administer the Forum’s day-to-day operations. The proposed financing scheme involved collecting dues from members as well as seeking outside funding from international donors. Participants noted that membership dues were important in order to display a financial commitment on the part of the representatives of the media organizations and to reinforce the verbal commitment to the idea of the Forum expressed at the conference. There was general consensus that the Forum has to be self-sustaining in order to succeed. Some participants emphasized that because journalistic quality is directly related to

independence of the media, just as the Forum should not seek funding from governments or political parties, it should also avoid accepting money from private sector entities, an idea that had been suggested in the proposal.

Beyond strengthening democracy, the Forum will help individual news organizations create and sell a better product. For that reason, participants suggested that this benefit should be emphasized when presenting media owners with the option of joining the Forum. As another means of raising revenue, participants discussed the proposal that the Forum conduct studies or offer consulting services that could be sold to media outlets. In the end, there was no consensus on this point, but the basic proposal of mixed funding through dues and outside donations was accepted as the best way for the Forum to proceed.

Session 5: Areas of Consensus and Pending Challenges

Members of the original Commission summarized the day's proceedings and pointed out areas of consensus and those that warranted further discussion by the permanent Forum. They noted that the standards elaborated in the final report should be endorsed as preliminary steps that would be fine-tuned by the Forum. Commission members mentioned the importance not only of adopting these standards, but also of promoting public debate on them to maximize the number of news organizations that are involved in the process, and to make the general public aware of the media's conscious self-evaluation of its place in a democracy. Commission members noted that the Forum would need to define an agenda that ensures the needs and perceptions of the general public are expressed in the media.

Issues that remained unresolved following the deliberations in Antigua include how to carry out activities such as training and how to define the methodology of self-evaluation. In terms of training, Commission members underscored the urgent need to train owners and editors to evaluate themselves, and to convince them of the need for good journalistic practices in the long term. Previous efforts in the area of training, including the Florida International University Seminar that resulted in the foundation of CELAP, focused only on training of

"Beyond strengthening democracy, the Forum will help individual news organizations create and sell a better product."

“The challenge now is to consolidate the commitment expressed by participants and to obtain outside funding.”

journalists. Participants saw the Forum as the next step in this decades-long process that would take journalistic training to a new level, directed towards editors and other media leaders, in addition to journalists.

In addition, the Forum is yet to determine how to obtain a real commitment from media owners, both in terms of financial support and leadership. On the question of financing, the consensus was that the Forum should look for financing from various sources so that it can self-sustain. The challenge following the Antigua meeting is to consolidate the commitment expressed by participants and to obtain outside funding.

Elections of the Executive Committee

The final session was devoted to electing the Forum's Executive Committee, which then met to plan next steps. The following participants were nominated and elected to serve on the executive committee: 1) Owners—Fabricio Altamirano, *El Diario de Hoy*, El Salvador; Hugo Holman Chamorro, *La Prensa*, Nicaragua; and Mario Antonio Sandoval, *Prensa Libre*, Guatemala. 2) Directors/Editors/Reporters: Lafitte Fernández, *El Diario de Hoy*, El Salvador; Manuel Gamero, *Diario Tiempo*, Honduras; Eduardo Enríquez, *La Prensa*, Nicaragua; and Jorge Hernández, Telecorporación Salvadoreña, El Salvador; Francisco Chamorro *El Nuevo Diario*, Nicaragua; and Djenane Villanueva, Canal 11, Las Noticias, Costa Rica.

The Executive Committee met briefly after the plenary session closed, discussed the profile of an ideal executive director, and agreed to share names of potential candidates before the next meeting. The Committee also discussed ways to generate interest and attract potential donor support for the Forum. It was suggested that the Forum showcase Victor Borge's content analysis report as its first completed product. Regarding training programs, members suggested conducting a survey of Commission members and a broad range of media outlets to develop a menu of requirements.

The Committee also grappled with the challenge of securing financial support for the Forum. Members suggested obtaining “seed funding” from the media outlets present at the Antigua meeting, and then creating a formal structure of financing. Representatives from the Soros Foundation in Guatemala and the

Swedish government expressed interest in supporting the Forum, provided that there is a financial commitment by the media outlets themselves. The UNESCO representative voiced his organization's willingness to cooperate with the Forum, as well. Representatives from the governments of Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Holland, and the United States were all present at the Antigua meeting and could serve as potential donors for the Forum in the long term.

The next meeting of the Executive Committee was scheduled for October 22 in Antigua, Guatemala.

APPENDIX D

CHARTER MEMBERS OF THE CENTRAL AMERICAN FORUM ON THE MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

Costa Rica

Rubén Rodríguez
Subdirector
Noticias Repretel

Ignacio Santos
Director
Telenoticias Canal 7

Alejandro Urbina
Director
La Nación

- * Djenane Villanueva
Reporter and Broadcaster
*Informe 11, Las Noticias, CNN
& Univisión*

El Salvador

- * Fabricio Altamirano
Executive Director
El Diario de Hoy
- Ricardo Chacón
General Editor
El Mundo

- * Lafitte Fernández
Editor General
El Diario de Hoy

Mauricio Funes
Director
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