

PRIME MINISTER

MR. WHITMORE

MS

Press Gallery Speech

Robert Armstrong has produced a contribution for the above dealing with the impact of the media on society, with special reference to the riots. It is in effect a redraft of the second half of the speech.

Assuming you like any of it, I think the basic decision is whether to ditch the stuff about the UNESCO and the treatment of news in the West as compared with the Communist bloc in favour of Sir Robert's material. You can't deal with all of it.

Sir Robert's is the most topical stuff but I have one serious reservation about it: you should not get yourself into the position of apparently advocating censorship. At the end of a week like this, we run the risk, putting it at its lowest, of alienating the media in so doing.

Whatever view we take of this week's riots, we cannot directly or necessarily indirectly blame the media, some of whom are being very helpful in their follow up.

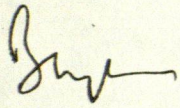
Thus I believe that whatever you say should be couched interrogatively; to acknowledge the difficulties of the media in exercising responsibility in a free society in the process of raising questions about their handling of violence, etc.

I feel very strongly about this. You cannot afford to get across the media. And there is no need to do so, especially when the media itself is worried about its role. Let us worry with them - not at them.

I should add that there is very considerable interest by radio and television in your speech this evening. My line is quite simple: we cannot draw a distinction between the writing and recording/ filming press but at the stage I have no idea whether it would be

/worth

worth their while attending. I feel that radio and television will be there against the eventuality of your saying something important.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'B. Ingham', written in dark ink.

B. INGHAM

10 July, 1981

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It is easy to condemn violence. We have to do more than that. We have to try to understand the reasons for it. We have to separate mindless hooliganism and organised sedition from the genuine frustrations and grievances which violence expresses, and for which we have as a society to find remedies.

And there is a further point. As one newspaper said this morning, events of the kind we have been witnessing provide a test of the quality of our society.

/We like to

B

We like to believe that we have a civilised and tolerant society: a society with a tradition of dealing with differences of opinion by discussion and debate - whether in Parliament, in the press, or in the pub - and not by violence; a society whose means of exchange is words and ideas, not sticks and stones and petrol bombs; a society based on self-respect and respect for others, not on selfishness and disregard for other people's rights and needs.

/That quality

That quality in our society is the condition upon which we enjoy the freedoms we cherish. So these events are a challenge to all of us who value those freedoms - the freedom of speech and the freedom of association.

They are an especial challenge to those of us who have responsibilities for the setting of the tone and standards of our society. That means the Government, of course, and indeed all political leaders; it means parents; it means teachers. And I should like to suggest to you that it means also the press and the broadcasters.

/One of the

D

One of the freedoms which depend on the quality of our society is the freedom of the press. If the press and the broadcasters depend on that freedom, and value it, then I suggest that they have a responsibility to discharge their role as opinion-formers with due regard for the effects their activities have on the quality of society.

There is no escape from that responsibility in the concepts of objectivity, detachment and balance. None of us can be detached from the quality of the society in which he lives, nor be balanced when the issue at stake is freedom.

/The responsibility falls

E

The responsibility falls with especial weight on the broadcasters, and above all on those in television. Television has all the power and impact of the visual medium; and it has national and continuous coverage.

Even when it is seeking only to entertain, it inevitably creates images which become norms or aspirations for its viewers.

We have a generation of young people brought up to watching television perhaps for several hours every day. How can they do otherwise than doubt the values to which they are exposed by it, or fail to be affected in their attitudes and conduct by the attitudes and behaviour they see portrayed on the screen?

/I am not

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I am not, of course, suggesting that you  
in the press and broadcasting should  
not report the sort of events which we  
have been witnessing. You have a duty  
to show us the unacceptable faces,  
as well as the more agreeable aspects,  
of the society in which we live.

But I suggest that in reporting them you  
have a duty to be mindful of the  
implications of the way in which you  
report them.

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/It is all too easy



G

It is all too easy to sensationalise them.

For instance, the image of a looter coming out of a shop with an armful of stolen goods is very powerful. It will sell your paper, or put up your ratings. But should you use it, on the screen or splashed across the front page? What about the shopkeeper who is robbed of the fruits of his work and savings? What about the effects of that picture on the viewer who may think: if he or she can do that, why not me?

I suggest to you, with all the strength at my command, that you cannot escape from the implications of questions like this for the way in which you do your job.

/It is not enough

H

It is not enough just to report and reflect the society in which you work. You have a positive duty, to yourselves and the rest of us, not to undermine it. In your own interests, in the interests of the freedom of the press, in the interests of the freedoms we all value, you cannot escape from the positive responsibility so to do your work and conduct your affairs as to defend and preserve the quality of society on which those freedoms depend.

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