

Workshop: **The Media & Corruption**

Presentation by

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Ladies and gentlemen, corruption is everywhere.

The press likes nothing better than reporting on corruption. Corruption, as our brilliant workshop organiser John Githongo reminds me, sells newspapers.

Yes it does. The front page of *The New York Times* recently featured a major story on corruption in aid funds in Bosnia, massive corruption and money laundering involving the Russians and the Bank of New York, and a story of somewhat different kind.

*The New York Times* ran a story with the headline: "A Bribery Case Taints 2,000 Divorces in Manhattan Matrimonial Court." The story by reporter David Rohde described how the chief administrator of the Manhattan Matrimonial Court accepted tens of thousands of dollars in bribes over the last seven years to expedite hundreds of divorces and get approvals on others that were fraudulently prepared. The administrator admitted that he accepted bribes ranging from \$10 to hundreds of dollars to take divorce papers and -- without having verified the authenticity of the papers as required -- quickly forward them to a judge for signing as uncontested divorces.

Who says we don't have grand corruption in the United States?

Oh, what fun you might say. After all, lots of divorcees now have a new pretext for suing their former spouses. Meanwhile, many of the people who bribed their way to divorce have remarried and may now be subject to prosecution as bigamists. Yes, a glorious story to peruse over breakfast.

The media has had even more fun with the corruption scandals at the International Olympic Committee. Pressing and probing by eager journalists forced the IOC chieftains into lies, cover-ups and absurd explanations. Autocrat IOC boss Juan Antonio Samaranch, who loves the phrase "values of Olympism," was reduced to announcing that he did not use first class hotel suites, never insists on having limousines and does not take a helicopter from his office in Lausanne to the city of Geneva. But, you will note that for all the press coverage, Mr. Samaranch remains in power.

At one level one could argue that it is a most pleasant coincidence of interests that the press finds corruption so good for its sales. After all, much of the time the articles are driving home some important ethical points and overlapping with one of Transparency International's core missions to build public awareness of the evils of corruption.

But, at another level as I read all this newsprint about corrupt divorce court officials and petty bribery in the Olympics, I worry that the media is insufficiently discerning. It seems to place all corruption stories in one big pile, hurl them on the front page and declare that they are all very

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed here are those alone of Frank Vogl and do not in all respects reflect official policies of Transparency International

important. In so doing, there is a risk that the public loses all sense of proportion.

The IOC corruption scandals, bad as they may be, are of minimal importance compared to the massive corruption in Indonesia and in Russia and in Zaire. In each of these cases millions of people have been impoverished because of the massive greed of people of influence who have plundered their own nations.

While my telephone rang off the hook for weeks on end with reporters asking about the Olympic scandals, the truth is that grand corruption under Abacha in Nigeria was of scant interest in the United States. The reality is that few journalists in the media in northern industrial countries have any meaningful idea of just how devastating to human rights and human dignity is bribery and corruption in much of the developing world and in Eastern Europe.

I encourage the press to continue to report as fully and forcefully as possible on corruption. But, I encourage editors at the same time to understand that the public at large needs to be told in full detail that many of the corruption stories are of grave importance, impacting peoples lives and undermining democracy.

Transparency International has done more than any other organisation to try and make people everywhere understand the evil of corruption. TI's Corruption Perceptions Index has been an effective tool in raising public awareness everywhere. The last CPI covered 85 countries accounting for well over 90 percent of world trade. The CPI tells a very bitter story -- corruption is perceived to be rampant in most of the developing countries that are ranked.

And, we know some of the reasons for this. New studies by Transparency International, which will be published soon, show unmistakably that corporations based in the leading exporting countries of the world are widely seen as using bribes on a major scale. Greedy and corrupt international corporations are talking deals with poorly paid civil servants and politicians across the developing world and the result is a massive theft of resources that are owned by the broad populace and should be used to serve the needs of the broad populace.

How do these robbers get away with their thefts?

They do so because the North has not taken the issue of foreign corruption seriously enough. They do so because in much of the South the institutions of a free press, an independent judiciary and open public fora enabling civil society to full operate, have all been weak or absent.

TI has worked tirelessly to tell the world that corruption is undermining prospects for decent lives for hundreds of millions of people, that corruption is undermining democracy in dozens of countries, that corruption is enabling governments to imprison reporters and impose media censorship, and that corruption needs to be measured in the hundreds of billions of dollars.

I am proud to be a part of the TI movement and to be associated with its public awareness work.

But, ladies and gentlemen, for all our leadership and all of our successes, we need to be objective: we are not doing enough and we do not do public relations very well.

TI is often late in commenting on breaking corruption stories of major global significance. TI's international secretariat is often hesitant to take the lead and charge forward in major

international debates, while the national chapters are often ill-equipped in press relations, or diplomatically cautious. Thus, for example:

- TI is not seen as a key player in many major public controversies and debates... it has yet to publicly comment on the major statement on corruption by the Group of 7 Finance Ministers on September 25.
- TI has not been visible and taken a bold public stand in decrying the regime in Indonesia. This regime seems to have allowed former President Suharto to escape meaningful indictment for all his alleged corruption and appears to have supported actions against *TIME* magazine for running a cover story on Suharto's bribes.
- TI has not been at the forefront in decrying the imprisonment of a journalist from The *Far Eastern Economic Review* in Malaysia, even though this vicious limitation on press freedom could be just the start of a new approach in Malaysia that would make it even harder to expose corruption there.
- TI has not been vocal about The Bank of New York scandal and the allegations of inadequate supervision by the IME of the funds it made available to Russia, some of which may have fallen into the hands of corrupt individuals. This huge case has led to important hearings in the U.S. Congress.

I believe that our failures to speak up are leaving too much of the stage to official organisations the World Bank, the UNDP, the OECD. We hear the fine leaders of these fine institutions at our conference in Durban. We see their views in the media and often they are excellent perspectives. But, in each case these leaders are the creatures of the governments that appoint them and that run their organisations. In each case these leaders speak for the official sector.

TI itself has many dealings with governments. Look at this conference - we owe some debts of deep gratitude to official organisations that are sponsoring this event. All NGOs worry at times about biting the hands that feed them.

But, TI is the voice on countering corruption of civil society.

TI needs to be heard fully and forcefully on the stage where the major international corruption issues are being hotly debated. It needs to have the ear of the press. But to win the media's ear it must have valuable things to say on the key issues.

Now that I have chastised TI, let me place these comments in the perspective of our workshop here.

We are a very young movement. We are still learning about how to determine our priorities, how to allocate our slender resources, and how to prioritise between competing activities. We are an organisation where power must reside in our national chapters and our international secretariat needs to be acutely sensitive of not getting out ahead of our chapters on many key issues. And, candidly, in this young environment we tend more often than not to be reactive, rather than pro-active when it comes to the press. We respond to press calls, but we initiate all too rarely.

We are not, in other words, very good at public relations... .but maybe this is not so bad?

I am a TI volunteer. In real life I run a public relations business. I used to be a journalist. Let me tell you the difference.

As a journalist my credo was to afflict the comfortable in order to comfort the afflicted. As a public relations professional I have no choice, if I wish to earn a living, then I must work to comfort my clients, most of whom are quite comfortable to start with.

If TI was better at PR it would probably be more subtle about the spin it puts on things and more suave and polished. Fortunately, amateurism abounds in TI on this front and we all seem to be continually caught on the fly by reporters wanting quick comments on breaking stories. In reaction, unlike corporate executives and politicians, we don't plan and strategise, we just comment. Much of the time I learn what Peter Eigen or Jeremy Pope thinks about an issue by reading their quotes in the media. Its honest, its direct.

My hope is that we can keep TI's media relations honest and direct, while becoming a little more polished and pro-active on the big issues. Meanwhile, we are open and available and I think the press around the globe has found us to be just that.

But, TI should not just be doing more in the public policy arena, it should also be doing more directly to help the media. The press is vital if corruption is to be reduced. The press has the role to expose corruption and to inform the public about corruption. TI has an obligation in my opinion to be at the very forefront in word and in deed in fighting for a free press everywhere.

We also should participate, along with many of the experienced experts, in training journalists to read balance sheets, to understand legal systems, to know what to look for when searching for corruption in public procurement agencies, tax collecting agencies and customs services.

TI should be at the fore in training efforts. And in these efforts TI's independent civil society perspective needs to be very clear.

Should TI do this alone?

I have already suggested that we should not. We need to join with organisations that have greater skills than we do in media training. But, we should pick our partners with care. We should avoid those partners, for example, who have special relations with governments. We can partner with foundations and with media organisations, but not with national and multilateral agencies.

I find it uncomfortable to talk about full freedom of the press with the World Bank or the United Nations. These agencies are owned by governments. When they stage a media training session in a particular country they may take care not to be critical of the host government, or invite for training those journalists who may be seen by the host government as dangerous opponents. TI does not need to get into these kinds of relationships on the media front.

In conclusion, permit me to take off my TI hat and my public relations hat and assume my hat as a columnist for The Earth Times newspaper. Yes, I have lots of conflicts of interest - at least I am transparent. As a journalist, let me say that the press thrives and succeeds only when it is independent.

As a journalist let me say that sometimes I am disturbed by corruption in the media. I am

disturbed how publishers do deals with advertisers that enable these advertisers to avoid media criticism and investigation. I am disturbed by governmental organisations paying for international trips for journalists, or for corporations to do the same thing. This must have a corrupting influence.

But, let me conclude with three simple and key messages:

First, the press must be still more forceful in highlighting the major corruption issues and their humanitarian and political consequences and not get overly distracted by the minor corruption scandals, however juicy they may be.

Second, the press must constantly challenge and it must challenge everyone. The press should challenge TI. It should see our balance sheets and challenge us to be open about our operations. It should challenge the relationships we have with our sponsors if it sees potential fault here. It should question our own expertise and our accountability. The press should be sure to review our methodologies before it publishes our CPI rankings. The press dare not get too close to governments, to business, to special interests and to non-governmental organisations. The battle against corruption demands an entirely independent press.

The future of our society rests on a deepening set of partnerships between civil society, government and business. The media must stand a little apart and challenge all three branches of the partnership with courage and independence. Only by this means can the partnership be kept free from corruption.

Third, the press must constantly remind society that without a genuinely free press, the corrupt will always feel safer. There are many of my colleagues with legal backgrounds who say that we need a free and a responsible free. I object. As soon as you use the word responsible you add an element of subjectivity. Potentates and corrupt dictators call journalists who oppose them irresponsible. The leadership of Singapore just bans media that it alone considers irresponsible, and so too do many other governments. I say better to have a press that is free and that is sometimes a bit irresponsible, than to have a censored press.