



**New Media: The Press Freedom Dimension
Challenges and Opportunities of New Media for Press Freedom
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UNESCO Headquarters, Paris**

**Remarks by Timothy Balding, Chief Executive Officer, World
Association of Newspapers, at the opening of the conference 'New
Media and the Press Freedom Dimension', Paris, 15 February 2007**

Good morning,

I'm pleased to welcome you to this conference on behalf of the World Association of Newspapers, which represents publishers and editors in more than 100 countries, working for 18,000 publications and, needless to say, the thousands of internet news and information web sites and blogs which are now an integral part of the news business. We are happy to have been invited to be a partner in this initiative by the World Press Freedom Committee, our long-time friends and allies in the global struggle for freedom of the media.

Twenty-five years ago, WAN ran one of its periodic campaigns designed to remind or re-educate public opinion about the fundamental issues at stake when we talk about media freedom, something, I must say, that never ceases to be necessary. The campaign slogan, which I've always liked, was: 'Freedom of the Press is Freedom of the Citizen'. The sense, of course, was that journalists are not a special breed of individuals with privileged rights unavailable to the common man (though as a journalist I confess we often forget to remain so humble), but simply those citizens whose work it is to exercise the rights to freedom of expression available, in theory at least, to everyone. In recent years, however, that slogan has taken on an additional

sense with the explosion of a multitude of new electronic distribution channels just a keyboard away from any man, woman or child, in the industrialized world at least.

A witty commentator once famously said: 'Freedom of the Press is available to anyone who can afford to buy one!' Year by year, as the internet sweeps the globe, the once-powerful monopoly of the printing press over the publication of words and texts of all kinds is in the process of being swept away. This is, in my view, bringing at once great opportunities and, at the same time, not inconsiderable dangers which require society's vigilance. On the credit side, citizens now have much greater control over how and when they receive information and, much more than ever before, they can react to it if they choose, they can participate and they can be active towards it. The news business is becoming, happily, more and more a dialogue between the providers and receivers of information and not an imposition of opinions and perspectives from an elite caste. On the negative side, the internet has opened up extraordinary new possibilities for the widespread, damaging and sometimes dangerous manipulation of information which is difficult if not impossible to stem. In my view, this phenomenon will increasingly place a heavy responsibility on professional journalists to maintain high standards of fact-checking, honesty and objectivity. The very fundamentals of our societies and democracies will be lost if we are unable any longer to distinguish between the true and the false in terms of information. The responsibility of news businesses is thus considerable. For the moment, it should be said, there remains a significant preference of the majority of readers to access their information through traditional print products, with 1.4 billion readers of daily newspapers world-wide, a figure that continues to rise, along with that of newspaper sales. It may not ever be so, however, as news businesses multiply their digital news distribution, while endeavouring to maintain their unique characteristics and role as newspapers.

Lest you think I'm headed off on a tangent here, well away from the theme of this conference, I will come to my point about this: newspapers, unlike other media forms that have emerged in the last fifty years, have almost alone – with exceptions, of course – carried the responsibility and performed the task of being the watchdog of government and other powerful forces, and have endeavoured to exercise their freedom to uncover wrongdoing at every level of society. Neither radio nor television

have ever really set themselves that mission. This freedom of the press has been fought for, bitterly, often at great human sacrifice and this continues to be the case in dozens of countries world-wide, with record numbers of journalists being killed and jailed every year. Freedom of the press is never simply handed over by governments; it is almost always the fruit of tremendous resistance, of a titanic struggle between the desire for truth and justice, free expression and debate, and the forces of repression and obscurantism. Very happily, a powerful new arm has appeared in this struggle over the past fifteen years and it has been taken up on the side of the good and the right, on the side of pluralism and democracy. The Internet, without doubt in my view, has been a tremendously positive breakthrough in overcoming the monopoly of information jealously guarded by authoritarian and dictatorial regimes. At one time, we all thought and said that the distribution of free information and opinion had become unstoppable and that revolutions would sweep the world as citizens discovered what had been hidden from them. Unfortunately, that turned out to be too optimistic a vision, as governments armed themselves with the surveillance and technical solutions necessary to block free information and arrest those trying to distribute it. But I like to think, I'm sure in fact, that they are fighting a losing battle; the mere fact that so many cyber-journalists are currently languishing in prison is, paradoxically perhaps, clear evidence of this.

I have so far avoided what I'm led to believe is one of the central questions of this conference - what rules and regulations should apply in terms of freedom to this medium, the Internet. If I've done so, it's because in truth I have so little to say about the issue. The Internet is, in essence, just one more platform in a rich panoply of distribution channels available to us. As such, it must of course benefit from the same protections in terms of free expression and the free flow of information as any other medium, those incarnated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

I wish you an excellent, informative and stimulating conference.

Thank you.