



**New Media: The Press Freedom Dimension  
Challenges and Opportunities of New Media for Press Freedom  
15 & 16 February, 2007  
UNESCO Headquarters, Paris**

**ADG Speech**

Excellencies, Ambassadors and Permanent Delegates,  
Distinguished Participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my honor and pleasure - on behalf of Mr. Koichiro Matsuura, Director General of UNESCO and Mr. Abdul Waheed Khan, Assistant Director General for Communication and Information - to welcome you to UNESCO for this international conference, "New Media: The Press Freedom Dimension."

Thank you all for coming to what promises to be a valuable opportunity to share ideas and exchange lessons.

My name is Mogens Schmidt and I am the Deputy Assistant Director General for Communication and Information, and maybe more important in this context, Director of the Division for Freedom of Expression, Democracy and Peace.

Please, let me express a special welcome to the distinguished colleagues with whom I share this opening panel: The representatives of the two main organizers of the Conference: Mr Richard Winfield, Chairman of the World Press Freedom Committee; and Mr Timothy Balding, Chief Executive Officer of the

World Association of Newspapers; And our two keynote speakers, Ms. Leslie Harris, Executive Director for the Center for Democracy and Technology; and Mr Guy Berger from Highway Africa, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa.

The role of this conference is to address the challenges and opportunities of new media for press freedom. As you all know, new media holds great potential as a resource for press freedom and freedom of expression. New media opens hitherto unseen opportunities as a platform for dialogue across borders, and allows for innovative approaches to the distribution and acquisition of knowledge.

These qualities are vital to press freedom, however they may be undercut by attempts to unduly regulate and censor both access and content. I am confident that our discussions will contribute to clarifying some of the complex challenges and best ways forward for press freedom and new media. For press freedom and freedom of expression is today, fortunately, widely recognized as being an important precondition for sustainable development and thus for social and economic prosperity.

UNESCO, as the only UN agency with a particular mandate to defend the free flow of information has been actively engaged in efforts to improve press freedom and its corollary, freedom of expression. Freedom of the press is, after all, an application of the individual human rights principle of freedom of expression. Press freedom and freedom of expression are guiding principles of UNESCO that apply to traditional as well as new media.

UNESCO recognizes that press freedom is central to building strong democracies, contributing to good governance, promoting civic participation and the rule of law, and encouraging human development and security. As such, UNESCO is committed to mobilizing efforts to promote freedom of expression and press freedom as a basic right indispensable to the exercise of democratic citizenship.

Let me point out just a few signposts that are relevant to new media and press freedom. First, the UNESCO Constitution states a commitment to fostering “the free exchange of ideas and knowledge” and “the free flow of ideas by word and image.” Of course, Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers.” The Declaration of Sofia, endorsed by the UNESCO General Conference in 1997, states “The access to and the use of these new media should be afforded the same freedom of expression protections as traditional media.” Most recently, I refer to the 4th principle of the Declaration of Principles issued by the Geneva session of the World Summits on the Information Society in December 2003, which provides a clear confirmation that new forms of communication should be afforded the same freedom of expression rights as traditional news media.

The challenge is how to turn these principled commitments into practical reality. At the heart of this issue is universality – of creating inclusive knowledge societies in which all have the opportunity to participate “regardless of frontiers.” Indeed, as the 4<sup>th</sup> principle of the Geneva Declaration states, “Communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organization. It is central to the Information Society. Everyone, everywhere should have the opportunity to participate and no one should be excluded from the benefits the Information Society offers.”

In drawing attention to these basic principles, I am under no illusion that the complex, ‘real world’ problems that we face are thereby solved. It is an unfortunate truth that, in many countries, there is a long road ahead of us in securing press freedom and there are still millions of citizens who have no access at all to new media. But these principles do provide a standard by which we may measure our actions and those of others. The fuller application and

implementation of these principles through concrete action is something we should all be working towards.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I believe that new media has a lot to contribute in transforming these promises into realities.

Today we focus our attention on press freedom as it relates with new media. As the impact of new media increases, so do regulation techniques that limit the free-flow of information. New media is subject to a number of restrictions that would not be accepted in traditional media. Every week we see violations of freedom of expression in all regions of the world, and the need to discuss how to prevent undesired side effects of new regulation has become urgent. We must emphasize that a free media, which is essential in upholding democratic societies, should not be hindered.

Such an understanding must in turn be met with concrete efforts to affirm new media's place alongside traditional media. It is essential that no new restrictions on the basic principles of press freedom and freedom of expression are applied with the introduction of new media. All citizens not only have the potential but also the right to express their ideas and opinions worldwide through electronic networks. This is also why UNESCO in the recent Internet Governance Forum in Athens in two workshops focused on how to ensure the openness of the Internet and the free flow of information.

The internet permits an unprecedented empowerment of the individual. It is probably this feature, together with the speed and the global character of the internet that has made many governments worry about granting internet users

the same right to freedom of expression as traditional media have in democratic societies. This quality of new media that is most disturbing to some governments is however likely to prove very resilient.

There are many existing measures used by governments to restrict free access to and use of the internet. Some measures are financial, such as high taxes or tariffs; other measures are technical, such as filtering and blocking software on servers; and yet others are administrative, such as having to obtain permission from authorities to register websites and a refusal to install international servers. In addition, there are sometimes legislative measures, for instance, in the form of special laws to block sites which are considered to offer ways of obtaining information contrary to certain political, behavioral, or moral standards or legislative acts that deal with security, or confidentiality laws to protect personal data.

While press freedom and freedom of expression are fundamental human rights, most countries have enacted national civil legislation limiting it in cases such as libel, breach of privacy and pedophilia. These matters may not be without controversy but, in general, such national legislation commands widespread support.

Another difficult challenge for your consideration is the connection between the internet and protection against terrorism. The balance between measures required for fighting terrorism and respect for fundamental rights is very difficult to find. There is a real risk that some security measures may, directly or indirectly, undermine the very principles and rights that terrorism seeks to destroy.

UNESCO stands firmly behind the principle of press freedom in this matter. The debate must not be locked into a discussion about 'good' or 'bad' information, without however shying away from frank discussions with and among media professionals on how to apply the highest ethical and professional standards.

It is dangerous to establish rules for the flow of information. Not only does it hinder the free flow of ideas and opinions but it may also force “unwanted” ideas to be expressed exclusively underground, making it impossible to openly counter for example hate speech and propaganda with informed arguments. Furthermore, there is the risk that ideas and opinions that could enhance the open debate on controversial issues will be silenced.

The real challenge is to fully exploit the potential of new media while not compromising civil liberties, including the right to privacy. Let us bear these considerations in mind as we reflect upon the challenges before us.

Our particular focus today, of course, is upon press freedom, which is especially important for democracy and good governance. In both developing and industrialized countries, new media has great potential to strengthen the institutions of representative government and civil society, to enable citizens to gather information and mobilize coalitions around policy issues, and to improve government efficiency and transparency through better communication with citizens.

With this in mind, it is most appropriate that this conference gives a focus to the role of new media in new democracies. We must draw attention to the crucial role that free, independent and pluralistic media plays in the democratic process. In emerging democracies, the media’s work to provide independent and trustworthy information can contribute significantly to processes of reconstruction and reconciliation. In times of upheaval and transition, people’s need for reliable information is especially great as well as their possibilities for expressing their own needs in the public sphere.

This is also why I am pleased to see that this conference gives special attention to diversity of new media. Too often internet receives the majority of attention at

the expense of other forms of what is considered new media. Devoting attention to direct satellite broadcasting, digital TV, and public service broadcasting encourages the diversity and openness that constitute the very essence of a free and healthy media.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is part of UNESCO's mandate to provide a platform for open discussion and to promote the free flow of ideas. I am confident that this Conference will contribute to clarifying some of the complex challenges and opportunities that we have to address in order to ensure that new media is grounded in press freedom and freedom of expression.

For its part, UNESCO will continue to fulfill its mandate to promote the free flow of ideas and images, universal access to information, and press freedom. The discussions that you will hold during these two days are of utmost importance. I look forward to the outcomes of your deliberations.

Thank you.