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Opening Remarks to the Sessions of the UNESCO

International Symposium on Freedom of Expression,
26 January, 2011¹

On 26 January 2011, UNESCO hosted the second International Symposium on Freedom of Expression at its Paris headquarters. The Swedish National Commission for UNESCO sponsored the conference. The symposium brought together individuals and organisations linked to the field of journalism and sparked not only debate and discussion on the future of freedom of expression, but also fostered dialogue between civil society and governments – an exchange that UNESCO will continue to support.

The symposium consisted of three main sessions devoted to The Status of Press Freedom Worldwide, Freedom of Expression on the Internet, and Press Freedom and the Safety of Journalists.

The conference was opened by UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova, and the Swedish Minister for European Affairs, Birgitta Ohlsson, spoke on the role of free speech and government accountability. The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Frank La Rue, gave the keynote address, calling attention to the impact of new technologies on the field of journalism and the importance of promoting freedom of access alongside freedom of speech.

The symposium was moderated by Helge Rønning, Professor of Media Studies at the University of Oslo. He made the opening remarks at each of the sessions.

Panelists in the first session were Omar Osman of the Federation of African Journalists, Jean-Francois Julliard of Reporters without Borders, Gayathry Venkiteswaran of Southeast Asia Press Alliance and Khaled Abu Aker of Arab Media Internet Network.

The mid-morning panel examined the dilemmas presented by freedom of expression on the Internet, with panelists Guy Berger of Rhodes University, South Africa, Gordana Vilovic of Zagreb University, William Dutton of Oxford University, and Robert Boorstin of Google.

The last panel consisted of Mónica González, Laureate of the 2010 UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize, Chile, Rodney Pinder of International News Safety Institute, Nancy Roc of Incas Productions, Haiti, and Elizabeth Witchel of the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Mr Mats Ringborg, Permanent Ambassador of the Kingdom of Sweden to UNESCO, and Jānis Kārklīņš, Assistant-Director General, Sector of Communication and Information, UNESCO, addressed the closing session of the symposium.

Session I. The Status of Press Freedom World Wide

Freedom of speech is basically an individual right, however it is at the same time a collective right. It is this duality that is the basis for analysing and defending freedom of expression as something essential to the development of democracy.

One of the basic arguments in relation to dealing with freedom of speech in modern society is that it is a right, which is in the public not the private realm, and that it historically is intrinsically linked to the development of mass media and technological means of communication, from the printing press to the Internet. Thus, any discussion of the status of freedom of speech in the world today must also be a discussion of the situation of the media, particularly the news media.

The ideal roles of the media in any society are, first, to provide citizens with information about their rights, second, to inform them and present them with different stories, images and arguments about the situation in the society and world they live in, and, third, to provide them with alternative and conflicting points of view, thus enabling them to freely make decisions about their lives and their society.

Free speech is a basis for legitimate government. Laws and policies are not legitimate unless they have been adopted through a democratic process, and a process is not democratic if government has prevented anyone from expressing his convictions about what those laws and policies should be.²

In some parts of the world, the main threat to individual liberty and freedom of expression still comes from the state. The rights of the individual have to be protected against excessive use of state power. In other parts of the world, however, with the transformation of media organisations into multinational, multimedia commercial conglomerates, the right to freedom of expression is confronted by a new threat, not originating in the excessive use of state power, but rather from the growth and activities of monopolistic media organisations in the form commercial concerns.

In an age when global communication conglomerates are key actors in the production and distribution of symbolic goods, reflections on the conditions of freedom of expression cannot be restricted to the territorial framework of the nation-state. Media industries, like other forms of multinational business, are driven primarily by the logic of profitability and capital accumulation. There is, however, no necessary correlation between this logic and the promotion of the greatest possible diversity in all forms of expression, openness, and pluralism in the sphere of communication. The challenge is to create conditions that secure these principles in an era of globalised and integrated media.

Session II. Freedom of Expression on the Internet

Internationally, the Internet community and freedom of expression defenders fight to hold on to freedom of speech on the Net and to extend its use as a democratic and free medium. They come up against attempts at censorship and control by the state, political groups, corporate interests and other kind of organisations. The Internet contains all kinds of content. The objectives of attempts to censor are to control not only the contents, but also the possibilities of the Net to serve as a free and democratic arena for communication.

On the one hand, since its beginnings in the early 1990s, the Net has been hailed as an inherently democratic means of communication. This is largely due to the fact that the Internet provides a participatory interface and a two-way flow of information between many different users simultaneously. It creates virtual spaces where communities without borders from around the world can enter into communication with each other. This makes the Net particularly well suited to global as well as new local social movements. The medium's capacity for networking and participation ideally give it the potential to be a perfect tool for democratic and free communication.

On the other hand, it has also become clear that the Internet is the most advanced tool for surveillance that exists, exemplified by the increasing number of legal provisions and technical systems of surveillance and interceptions of communications that are now being introduced – e.g. the EU Data Storage Directive. Even more obvious is the fact that the number of countries applying restrictions on the Net seems to be going up, and this is not limited to countries that one usually would associate with restricting freedom of expression. Particularly in relation to anti-terrorist laws, morality issues and religious questions, filtering of the Net is increasing steadily.³

Session III. Press Freedom and the Safety of Journalists

In 2010, 44 journalists were killed while working, and many more were threatened, beaten, harassed and subjected to other forms of persecution. These instances represent more than a threat to the individual reporters, they also represent a menace to free information and to the principle of freedom of expression and press freedom. Through the work of a variety of organisations such as Reporters without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists, we learn about the situation for those who are in direct physical danger, as well as about the hidden persecution that takes place in so many parts of the world.

Journalists are more at risk when there are no watchdogs. The challenge is to move quickly in the regions where journalists are under fire. New communication technologies may contribute to creating a global journalism community, which may make it easier for journalists to look out for each other and hold governments that persecute journalists accountable. There is no easy way to stop threats against journalists. It is helpful when threats are published. And there are demands to hold those who are responsible accountable. Unfortunately, governments often do not punish those who kidnap, torture, or kill journalists, and indeed it is frequently the governments themselves that are responsible.

Here, I believe it is important to also focus on the impact of threats to journalists in the broader context of freedom of expression. The feeling of being in danger leads to self-censorship. And this is common also in countries that we do not associate with direct threats to journalists' safety. According to a survey from 2000 of nearly 300 journalists and news executives undertaken by the Pew Research Center and the *Columbia Journalism Review*, self-censorship was commonplace in the US news media. About one-quarter of the local and national journalists surveyed said they had purposely avoided newsworthy stories, while nearly as many acknowledged they had softened the tone of stories to benefit the interests of their news organisations.⁴ And there is of course a clear relationship between censorship and self-censorship.

To return to my introduction to the first session, while freedom of expression is an individual right, it is exercised in collective and public situations. Thus, threats to journalists' individual right to express themselves also constitute a threat to citizens' right to be informed and their ability to voice their opinions freely.

Notes

1. For further information about the Symposium see <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/events/international-symposium-on-freedom-of-expression/>
2. Dworkin, Ronald (2006) "The Right to Ridicule", *The New York Review of Books* Vol. 53. No. 5. March 23. 2006.
3. For an overview see among others: <http://www.efa.org.au/Issues/Censor/cens3.html> (accessed 05.10.08)
4. <http://people-press.org/report/39/>