

**Address to the Second Committee
Item (91b) Science and Technology for Development**

**WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY
THURSDAY 23 OCTOBER, 10:30 A.M.
CONFERENCE ROOM 2**

As delivered

Talking points

1. Introduction:

[Words of appreciation for Chairman]

Most grateful to have an opportunity to address this distinguished Committee on the subject of science and technology for development.

- Let me start out by pointing out that not everybody is a supporter of technology. The Swiss writer and playwright Max Frisch, for example, dismissed technology as “the art of arranging the world so that we need not experience it”.
- However, most of us in this room do not share Mr. Frisch’s perspective, perhaps because we come from a later generation; one that has seen the benefits that technology can bring. I do believe that humankind cannot live by technology alone, but I am also conscious that the ICT revolution has – to use the language of the computer age – “upgraded” the lives of millions of people.
- Information and communication technology is not an end in itself, but is a means of supplying and presenting information and content. It is an efficient medium to promote learning, increase knowledge, and create awareness of rights, freedoms, as well as development imperatives.

- Technology has become a tremendous force for sharing experience – for integrating people and nations into a global economy that has the potential to benefit everyone. Timely access to news and information can promote trade, education, employment, health and wealth.
- That said, we are all aware that – like any revolutionary development – there are problems, notably that too many of the world’s people remain untouched by this revolution. I have had the occasion to remark elsewhere (in your presence, Mr. Chairman) that the information revolution, unlike the French Revolution, has a lot of liberté, some fraternité, and no égalité. And we must find ways to address these problems.
- The World Summit on the Information Society will be the first time that issues such as the role of communications in promoting development, and the challenges of cybersecurity, "spam", Internet governance and freedom of expression in the information age will be raised for global discussion and action at the highest governmental levels, with the participation of all those who have a stake in the outcome.

2. Press Freedom

- But WSIS is a vast subject, and I have come before you today, in my capacity as the United Nations Secretariat’s senior official responsible for public information, to focus on one aspect of its work. And that is to ask you to support a principle that is already well enshrined in international instruments, and is essential to the media – press freedom.
- Press freedom, including its application to new technologies, will be in the spotlight at the WSIS. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has expressed his confidence that the Summit will reaffirm the universality of press freedom through all media, as envisioned in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I want to ask you to ensure that it does.
- There can be little argument that access to information and freedom go together. The information revolution is

inconceivable without political freedom. And the spread of information has already had a direct impact on global competitiveness. It also has an impact on the accountability and transparency of governments around the world – and thus on their effectiveness.

- It is in the best interests of their citizens to live in a State that is free, that is economically competitive and that has an effective government. It is therefore in the best interests of governments to resist the temptation to control and censor information. Prosperous countries can play an additional role to support press freedom – by promoting greater, freer and fairer access to information technology for developing countries, by helping them to improve their information infrastructure, and by sharing technological advances with them. This is a point that has effectively been made by many developing country democracies in the preparatory process in Geneva.
- While the main players at the Summit will be governments, there has been strong involvement and input from civil society, the private sector and the media during the preparatory phase. Reports on the most important subjects for debate have been (appropriately enough) posted on the Summit website, increasing the transparency of the negotiations, and providing fuel for debate by non-governmental organizations.
- But I have to share with you my concern that many in the press see this process as involving an attempt to pull back from what has already been achieved on press freedom. And the way the press focuses on the issue will inevitably help shape the world's perception of the success of the Summit.
- So the final documents that emerge from the Summit should reaffirm the universality of the freedom of the press in all media – including the Internet. There is, I believe, nothing new in such an assertion. Freedom of expression and the freedom to communicate are already assured in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which reads: “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 and regardless of frontiers”.

- Member States of the United Nations have reaffirmed that this right applies to freedom of the press in a series of international declarations. The landmark Windhoek Declaration of 3 May 1991 opens with the words “Consistent with article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the establishment, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press is essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation, and for economic development”. This was our African event, and the General Assembly welcomed this declaration, honouring the 3rd of May, the day of its adoption, as World Press Freedom Day, an annual event commemorated here which you, Mr. Chairman, have addressed. The 1997 Declaration of Sofia actually goes one step further, stating that “access to, and the use of ... new media should be afforded the same freedom of expression protections as traditional media”.
- At the World Summit, States will be asked to reaffirm these principles: principles that they have already proclaimed in the five regional declarations on independent and pluralistic media.
- It is quite clear that the free flow of information is in the interests of all countries. Restraints on the flow of information directly undermine economic well being. Global interdependence means that those who can receive and disseminate information freely have an edge over those who do not. The ability to receive, download and send information through electronic networks, and the capacity to share information, have become crucial to the health of economies and civil societies.
- I am confident that Member States attending WSIS will abide by the commitments they have made many times in the past, will acknowledge that press freedom is in the interests of all people, will recognize the media as a fellow stakeholder in the effort to use information technologies to improve the world, and will acknowledge that the media can – when not excessively fettered – make a major contribution to bridging the digital divide.

- Please understand that I am not advocating anarchy – press freedom does not mean giving *carte blanche* for the dissemination and promotion of any and every idea, product or cause. In every country, the law imposes certain limits on the press in order to protect the right to privacy and to prevent abuse of media by criminals and terrorist groups. As an American Supreme Court Justice famously put it, “Freedom of expression does not include the right to falsely shout ‘Fire’ in a crowded theater”.
- It is only logical that these boundaries – envisaged under Article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and already in place for “traditional” media – be extended to the Internet. Action has been taken by some governments to shut down Internet sites that peddle child pornography, or that promote anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and racial hatred. These measures fall under national penal law, and are not – in a national context – viewed as a threat to freedom of speech.
- What the media are asking, and what I too (as a citizen of a developing country which protects press freedom) believe is important, is that we must be very careful not to sanction extensions to such restrictions. The challenge faced by the representatives of Member States at WSIS will be to find ways to ensure that the essence of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration – and the benefits that accrue from a free press and from free access to information – are not sacrificed to meet the challenges that international communication pose to reasonable national restrictions.
- To promote press freedom, and to engage the media in the dialogue about the development of the information society, the UN Department of Public Information, the European Broadcasting Union and Switzerland will hold a World Electronic Media Forum as a parallel event to the intergovernmental Summit, from 9 to 11 December. The Forum will bring together media executives and practitioners from developed and developing countries, as well as policy makers and UN officials, to discuss the role of the electronic media.
- Multiculturalism is the other side of press freedom. What is the point, some ask, of having press freedom in a poor country if

there are no resources to exercise this freedom? All components of the information society, especially in developing countries, should have the means, resources and infrastructure to create and spread original content, in harmony with their cultural identity, and utilizing their own language. We have spent much of the 20th century, in the words of US President Wilson, making the world safe for democracy. We must spend some of the 21st century making the world safe for diversity.

- The Summit should help foster the creation of domestic content in line with the local culture. Cultural diversity and pluralism are essential to an inclusive information society. The two concepts – diversity of content and press freedom – can and need to go together.
- The Information Society must allow for two-way communication between different peoples and societies, so that traditional knowledge, wisdom and practices become part of the global exchange.

Conclusion:

- As the World Summit approaches, please let me assure you that United Nations Secretariat and particularly its Department of Public Information stands ready to work closely with you to make the Summit – and our wider efforts to build an inclusive global information society – a success.

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