Talking points

1. Information and Communications Technology for development

- Thank you. Let me start out by telling you that in addition to my role heading the UN's Department of Public Information, I am also a novelist. And -- with the possible exception of science fiction writers –novelists have not always been the greatest fans of machines. 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."

- You will perhaps be glad to know that I do not share Mr. Frisch's perspective, perhaps because I come from a later generation; one that has seen the benefits that technology can bring. I do believe that mankind cannot live by technology alone, but I am also conscious that the ICT revolution has – to use the language of the computer age – "upgraded" to the lives of millions of people.

- 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.

- In the two years from 2000 to 2002 the number of people using the Internet worldwide almost tripled, from just over 200 million to more than 600 million. I am told that there will be some 2 billion users by the end of 2005. E-commerce is growing at about 35 per cent a year, whereas global economic growth is only at 4 to 5 per cent. And the value of secure business-to-consumer transactions is expected to reach $75 billion by the end of 2004. ICT has become not a substitute for experience, but a revolutionary means of sharing it.

- Therein the good news. But – like any revolutionary development, there are problems. In particular I am worried, and we should all be worried, that too many of the world's people remain untouched by this revolution; that the "digital divide" threatens to exacerbate already-glaring gaps between rich and poor, within and between countries.

- The digital divide has many aspects. There is a "technological divide" in capacity, optical fibres and high-speed connections – for example, the 400,000 citizens of Luxembourg can count on more international Internet bandwidth than Africa's 760 million citizens.

- There is a "content divide", made even wider by the new technologies: for instance, nearly 70 per cent of the world's web sites are in English.

- And there is a "gender divide" that separates men and women. Women and girls throughout the world enjoy less access to information technology – yet such access would go a long way indeed towards promoting their advancement and empowerment.

- ICTs are a powerful tool to accelerate efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals of combating poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environment degradation and gender inequality. With the widespread and innovative use of ICT, we may attain those goals. But all aspects of the digital divide – one of the greatest non-tariff barriers to world trade – must be addressed.

- ICTs will only serve development goals if access to information and communication can be made more universal and affordable; if the right to receive and impart information contained in Article 19 of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights is protected as a fundamental right; and if a policy framework is in place that is transparent and predictable.

- Accelerated development of ICT infrastructure can benefit developing countries. But two things are needed. Firstly developing State leaders need to take ICTs seriously – to recognize that infrastructure development is a priority; to assess and support the most appropriate technologies; and to help promote training for people in their use. Secondly, developed country leaders must provide assistance to the less developed neighbours to develop communications infrastructures.

The private sector:

The private sector also has a role to play:

- We must inspire business and industry to develop hardware and software packages that are appropriate, affordable and user-friendly for the vast majority of people. And we must highlight that helping development can be economically viable and profitable.

- As Secretary-General Annan mentioned in his message to this conference, we at the United Nations are particularly excited by the prospects that Wi-Fi (wireless fidelity) opens up, to provide access to information in areas where fixed-line infrastructure is lacking.

- Broadband – as its becomes cheaper – can also help bridge the divide by allowing developing countries to develop an integrated voice, data and video

network.

- The United Nations is at work on this front through the UN ICT Task Force. This body brings together the UN and the private sector in a collective effort to put ICT at the service of development. Task Force members come from governments, the private sector, multilateral organizations, civil society, non-profit foundations and academia. Together, they foster public-private partnerships to make a difference in vital areas such as education, health care, gender equality, and poverty eradication.

- The W.S.I.S. will be a unique opportunity for world leaders to agree to harness the ICT revolution in the service of the development goals they set for their countries and for the international community at the Millennium Summit in 2000 – the Millennium Development Goals -- and at the Monterrey Conference and Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002.

- This World Summit is unusual. Most of the Summits held thus far have been convened to garner support to reverse some negative trend– to arrest damage caused to the environment, to ensure that population growth does not render our world untenable, to press for an end to the abuse of the rights of women. The W.S.I.S, however, is a Summit charged with better distributing a bounty – the bounty that information technology offers us.

- And we can do a lot now to shape the information society; the future of the information society is in our hands.

Press freedom:

- One issue that will be discussed at the Summit that is particularly close to my heart, and that of my Department, is the issue of press freedom. Some people fear that the Summit will be used to wind back hard one international recognition of the necessity of a free press –driving a wedge into that recognition by imposing controls on press freedom on the Internet. This cannot happen! We must strive to promote open media, and stress the role of press freedom in promoting democracy and good governance.

- All countries have a stake in upholding the free flow of information. Restraints on the flow of information directly undermine development. Those who can receive and disseminate information almost always have an edge over those whose access is curtailed. The ability to receive, download and send information through electronic networks, and the capacity to share information, has become a new yardstick of prospects for development.

- The final documents that emerge from the Summit should reaffirm the universality of the freedom of the press in all media – including the Internet.

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This freedom is 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".

- This right has been further enunciated 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." The 1997 Declaration of Sofia actually goes one step stating that "access to, and the use of ... new media should be afforded the same freedom of expression protections as traditional media".

- It is my expectation that the Governments attending W.S.I.S. will abide by the commitments they have made many times in the past, and will recognize that the media is a fellow stakeholder in our efforts to use information technologies to improve our world, and that – unfettered – the media can make a major contribution to bridging the digital divide.

- This is not, of course, to say that Government's do not have legitimate concerns, about hate media, about issues of national security and about the preservation of cultures, among others. Rather, I think that the solution does not lie in inhibiting press freedoms, but rather in ensuring both the rights and the obligations, that traditional publishers and broadcasters possess in free societies, to all media.

- 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 authorities 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.

- I will end with a plea and a promise. First the plea. As the World Summit approaches, I ask you – the leaders of this dynamic industry – to give thought to creative uses of technology that can help improve standards of living in developing countries. And now the promise. The United Nations stands ready to work closely with you to make the Summit – and our wider efforts to build an inclusive global information society – a success.