

SECOND PHASE OF WSIS, 16-18 NOVEMBER, TUNIS

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The information society will shape the future, but whether it will reflect the democratic, social and cultural values of our age depends far more on the political will needed to put media and the principles of independence, pluralism and quality information at the heart of policymaking.

The role of media is critical to hopes of achieving the objectives of this summit. It is also critical to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

It is surprising, then, that the importance of media in the Information Society has still not been properly recognised at this Summit. There is still a conviction that, above all, it is the technology itself that matters, not the quality of information or citizens' freedom to use it as they see fit. This is, I believe, a profound mistake.

- Never has it been more important for media and journalists to identify with quality, with standards and with sound ethical practice in their work.
- Never has it been more important to nurture diversity and to support media in promoting the spread of reliable information among and between peoples.
- Never has it been more important to reinforce free expression and put press freedom at the top of the international agenda.

The absence of commitment to implement fundamental free expression principles confirms the view of many in media that the WSIS will not create an enabling environment for an Information Society based on democratic values.

They point to voluminous evidence of states where there are obstacles to free speech and editorial independence. Too many governments are intolerant of dissent, negligent in their defence of citizens' rights, and are cruelly indifferent to the hardship of media and journalists who suffer for their commitment to free expression.

It would be remiss of me not to speak plainly and to condemn the incidents in the last few days in which some journalists, media and human rights defenders have been subject to heavy-handed policing and intimidation only a few miles from this hall.

While we in this big tent of solidarity enjoy full access to the Internet, outside there is an unacceptable level of indifference to the rights of all citizens to have access to independent sources of information for no other reason than they provide independent and critical political opinions.

It is not enough to come to this podium and speak, albeit with sincerity and conviction, about building an information society that represents progress for all, unless we are ready to change the culture of relations between political and civil authorities and the people who yearn to express themselves freely.

While we welcome the recognition in the Tunis Commitment that the freedom of expression and the free flow of information, ideas, and knowledge, are essential for the information society and beneficial to development, many journalists will believe it only when they see it.

We can make change this view, but only if we undertake to make a new commitment:

- to include media in consideration of all aspects of future policy, including, crucially, the elaboration of a new system of internet governance;
- to lift all obstacles to access and use of new information technologies and
- to act to end the crime of impunity in the killing of journalists and media staff;
- and, above all, to elaborate new programmes in support of free expression, providing resources that will mobilise media in Africa and other areas of need, to ensure the information society truly makes a contribution to improving the lives of all.

If we do that we will surely make a difference to people's lives the world over.

Thank you