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Организация  
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科学及文化组织

# UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

## *Social Journalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: When Everyone Can Become a Journalist*

Speech by  
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**Baku International Humanitarian Forum**  
**Baku, Azerbaijan**  
**10-11 October 2011**

Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and gentlemen

UNESCO is grateful to the organizers of the Baku International Humanitarian Forum for the invitation to participate in this important gathering, especially given the tremendous global changes in the media and communications. Indeed, the choice of the theme of 'Social Journalism' for this panel appropriately captures the nature of the opportunities presented to us by boundless technological innovation.

Technological innovation has clearly spawned new ways of communicating, including enhancing citizen or 'social' participation in ways hitherto unknown. For many, it is such technological innovation that has given rise to what is varyingly referred to as '*social journalism*', '*citizen journalism*', '*community journalism*', and so on. An important thread running through such journalism is that of greater civic and social involvement, and UNESCO strongly believes in the democratization of communication to enhance the role of citizens and 'ordinary people' in influencing the public debates and policies that affect them.

Let us now consider all of this in the current context. Presently, 2 billion people use the Internet and produce 156 million of public blogs. The past few years have witnessed a surge of social networks, user-generated content and micro-blogging which have provided an opportunity for nearly every Internet user to be a potential journalist, broadcaster and publisher, with the ability to create, modify and share digital content and knowledge with millions of other users both locally and globally, much faster and more efficiently than any centralized source. These changes introduce new patterns of communication, break down language barriers and create new forms of creative expression, journalism and participation.

All over the world, we have witnessed the shift from a passive audience of mass media to an active one, engaging with the media through the appropriate technologies. It is now hard to find a media organization that does not seek feedback from its audiences. People are becoming active contributors and user-generated content (UGC) is being awarded a more prominent place in broadcast schedules. Increasing inputs are provided by citizen journalists, particularly as regards breaking news stories. Photos and video clips taken from mobile phones persist through web-based networks as social documents even when media are subjected to repressive control.

In short, digital media technologies have created a sort of a “dialogic loop”, increasing interactivity with the media and citizens’ participation.

As a result, citizen-bloggers and user-generated content producers around the world are challenging authorities, exposing corruption, and expressing their opinions via the Internet. These new media frontiers have enriched news and information resources and reshaped the media landscape, which was traditionally the realm of the print press, broadcasters and news agencies. The Arab Spring, for example, has demonstrated the transformative power of free speech to the world, and the empowerment of its citizens through access to a competing range of ideas.

UNESCO, as the sole UN Agency with the mandate of promoting media development, recognizes that freedom of expression is central to building strong democracies, contributing to good governance, promoting civic participation and the rule of law, and encouraging human development and security. UNESCO thus takes a comprehensive view of freedom of expression: the principle of freedom of expression must apply not only to traditional media -- press, radio and television -- but also to the Internet and all types of emerging media platforms such as social media. To this end, UNESCO’s role is to advocate the continuing development of the Internet as a global public resource that is

open to everyone, including women and young people. The emergence of the Arab Spring, for example, means that we must nurture new technologies in a way that enhances gender equality, in addition to protecting the communication rights of all citizens.

As part of that role, UNESCO recently published a report entitled '*Freedom of Connection – Freedom of Expression: The Changing Legal and Regulatory Ecology Shaping the Internet.*' As this report makes clear, parallel to the increasing usage of ICTs, there is a global tendency that more and more control and regulation, in one way or another, have been applied in many countries. Freedom is not therefore the inevitable by-product of technological innovation and change - it must be guarded by appropriate policy, legal and regulatory measures.

It is for this reason that UNESCO has taken the lead in fostering discussions on Internet Governance through its participation in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process and the Internet Governance Forum (IGF).

In addition, UNESCO is initiating a global legal survey on Internet privacy, aimed at mapping the current regulatory landscape in the U.S., the EU, Asia, Latin America, Arab States and Africa in relation to Internet privacy. The end result is to provide a set of recommendations arising from an analysis of the existing legal

protections, self-regulatory guidelines, challenges, and cases relating to the issue.

Apart from policy, legal and regulatory measures aimed at enhancing citizens' usage of new technologies, it is important to make a parallel effort to sensitize citizens to the virtues and vices associated with such technologies. Technologies are not ideologically neutral. For this reason, UNESCO believes that citizens must become media and information-literate. This is what we refer to as the *demand* side of media development: a process by which we enable citizens to relate more positively with the *suppliers* of media and information products.

Allow me to say a few more words about media and information literacy from the point of view of UNESCO. Our literacy campaign straddles both *media* and *information* in order to underscore the fact that technological *convergence* is allowing for the kind of conceptual, operational, pedagogical and policy synergies in which media and other information providers are increasingly becoming embedded. Our key strategy is the development of resources on media and information literacy for teachers in schools, including developing media and information literacy indicators as benchmarks.

It is important for citizens to critically evaluate their information providers in terms of their messages, the context in which they produce those messages, and the democratic obligations to which

they must be held accountable. This is particularly applicable to news media. Through its media and information literacy activities, UNESCO will contribute to cultivating vibrant knowledge societies in which news media become a subject of life-long knowledge and learning, as well as of democratic discourse.

The importance of media and information literacy has further been underscored by UNESCO's Member States through their reflection on the role of the Internet in society. The need for citizens who can discern the virtues and vices associated with the Internet cannot be overemphasised. It is our collective responsibility to leverage the potential of the Internet, and media and information literacy is one of the tools at our disposal.

While we celebrate the empowering of citizens through new technologies, we must not forget that traditional journalism is still an important social institution through which many people communicate. We know that the rise of the Internet and other digital media pose a particular challenge for traditional news outlets including print and broadcasting, but professional journalism still remains an important part of democratic communication ecology.

Indeed, in many cases, traditional media have begun to harness elements of 'citizen' or 'social' journalism in order to enhance the value of their editorial content. By subjecting 'citizen' or 'social'

journalists to a system of editorial checks and balances, they are beginning to add value to user-generated content. In the process, we are beginning to see more 'institutional' forms of 'citizen' or 'social' journalism.

For its part, UNESCO recognizes the need for working with media professionals in order to sensitize them to the *journalistic* possibilities of user-generated content. For example, in 2009, UNESCO worked with the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association (CBA) to publish the book entitled *Guidelines for Broadcasters on Promoting User-Generated Content and Media and Information Literacy*. It was a timely reminder of the positive interaction that should exist between traditional journalists and other types of 'journalists' in the service of democracy and development.

The challenge is to strike a balance between traditional journalism and the emerging forms of communication, however we may characterize them. Traditional journalism has a system of editorial controls which ensures that content is filtered, while citizen or social journalism may have clear ideological objectives. This means that we must have a comprehensive approach that engages not only the emerging forms of social communication but also the journalistic possibilities that new technologies hold for traditional media.



Ladies and Gentlemen,

A gathering of the magnitude of the Baku International Humanitarian Forum provides, in my view, an ideal opportunity for us to reflect on the complex issues that technological innovations have spawned, particularly the emergence of new forms of communication. UNESCO deeply shares the premise of this Forum, namely that new technologies are challenging journalistic orthodoxies. At the centre of this debate must be greater citizen or social empowerment and participation as well as the effective integration of human rights. If we have learnt anything from the Arab Spring, it is that we must engage our people in their daily concerns – and these are at once economic, political and technological.

Thank you.