



United Nations
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Organización
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Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Address by Irina Bokova,

Director-General of UNESCO

**on the occasion of the Opening Session of the International
Symposium on Freedom of Expression**

UNESCO, 26 January 2011

Your Excellency Birgitta Ohlsson, Minister for European Union Affairs of Sweden,
Mr Frank La Rue, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and
Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and an honour to open the second *International Symposium on
Freedom of Expression* in the house of UNESCO.

I wish to thank Sweden and the Swedish National Commission for UNESCO for
their generous support to this initiative. It is important that we continue the dialogue
we launched with the first International Symposium in 2009.

I am grateful for the presence of so many representatives from Member States, the
private sector, non-governmental organizations, academia and the media.

I think we have brought together today everyone who should be here – and from a
wide range of countries.

I extend warm greetings also to Mónica González Mujica, laureate of the *2010
UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize*. Your courage is exemplary
and your work inspiring. Thank you for being here with us.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We meet to explore the current state of press freedom across the globe, the safety of media professionals and freedom of expression over the Internet.

We are here, I think, because we all agree on some key points.

We agree that freedom of expression is a fundamental human right underpinning all other civil liberties. We agree that it is a key ingredient of tolerant and open societies and that it is vital for the rule of law and democratic governance.

We agree also that freedom of expression is key for growth. Freedom of expression allows for the free flow of ideas necessary for innovation. It bolsters accountability and transparency across the public and private spheres.

I hope we agree also that freedom of expression implies responsibility – responsibility to accurate information and for professional ethics, responsibility to promote tolerance and understanding.

UNESCO's mandate builds on these principles. Our Constitution calls on Member States to work together to advance mutual knowledge and understanding between peoples through the "free flow of ideas by word and image."

UNESCO is driven by the idea that the defences of peace must be built in the minds of men and women. Freedom of expression is a foundation stone of these defences.

We may agree on all of these points, but we have come together, because our times feature great paradox.

We have unprecedented opportunities for expression at our disposal thanks to new technologies and the Internet. More and more people are able today to produce, update and share information widely, within and across national borders. We have fabulous new ways for data to be stored efficiently.

All of this is a blessing for creativity, exchange and dialogue.

At the same time, new threats are arising. In a context of rapid change, these are combining with older forms of restriction to pose formidable challenges to freedom of expression.

These challenges take different shapes in various contexts, but they share the same nature, as violations of a fundamental human right.

A pluralistic and editorially independent press is not common throughout the world. Legal and regulatory mechanisms of control remain in many countries. Taxation and licensing procedures are used still as means of control and deterrence. Defamation charges too often remain criminalised rather than part of the civil code. National legislation on media and freedom of information fails in some countries to meet international standards. In others, such legislation has yet to be implemented – or even passed.

Challenges arise also inside the media sector.

Professionalism could be strengthened almost everywhere in the world. The accountability and credibility of media has fallen too often under question. Voluntary self-regulation mechanisms need to be established or strengthened in many countries.

Violence against journalists remains the most serious danger to freedom of expression.

According to *Reporters Without Borders*, whose Secretary General is among our speakers, 57 journalists were killed for reasons connected to their work in 2010.

UNESCO takes this threat very seriously. As Director-General, I speak publicly on every occasion a journalist has lost his/her life and appeal to the appropriate authorities to investigate the circumstances of this death and inform UNESCO about the results.

Most of those who face death are not correspondents in war settings, but local journalists reporting on corruption and criminality. They are simply silenced to keep misconduct from being revealed. Short of death, journalists across the world are pressured, intimidated, threatened and abused.

Too many journalists find themselves in prison for the wrong reasons. Too many are forced to flee their countries. Too many resort to self-censorship to protect themselves.

The last decade has seen rising impunity for such crimes.

We all need to redouble our efforts to redress this dramatic and unacceptable situation.

The digital age is giving rise to new threats to the safety of those who publicly disseminate information.

Every week, we learn about new ways in which information is censored, filtered and blocked. We hear more and more about bloggers being attacked, imprisoned and killed.

The speed of technological development has triggered new debates about freedom of expression. These are very necessary.

These debates touch on the right to privacy and personal security. They carry on the definition of sensitive information and the potential harm caused by information made available on the Internet and through social networks. The proliferation of hate speech and defamation over the Internet is raising sharp questions about responsibility. The protection of journalists' sources and whistle-blowers is being thrown into new light.

Debates focus also on the legitimate right to security and the interests of States. They link up with issues of cyber-espionage and cyber-crime. The role of Internet providers is now open for discussion, as is the use of technology to expand surveillance.

I believe UNESCO is an important platform to take these debates forward.

During the last session of UNESCO's Executive Board, Member States requested us to explore many of these questions through a reflection paper on UNESCO and the Internet. I look forward to your thoughts enriching our discussion.

The digital landscape is also shaking the business of media to the core.

Traditional business models are showing signs of weakness, while existing legislation and regulations are pressed by reality. The sector is under stress from all sides. Pressure is compounded by the impact of the global economic crisis.

We need to rethink how to protect media professionals in a harsh new climate. We need to consider how to foster ethical and professional standards for the production of quality information in a context of rapid change.

Frustration will deepen across the media sector until these challenges have been addressed.

Access still remains an issue.

Though considerable progress has been made in the past five years, the majority of the world's population still does not have access to the benefits of information and communication technologies.

We must design innovative ways to promote access and creation of local content and applications, to develop media literacy, and to open new horizons for sharing information and knowledge.

The Broadband Commission for Digital Development, which UNESCO established with the International Telecommunication Union, is a good example.

This is vital for empowering citizens to participate in social and political life. This is crucial for healthy societies, sustainable economies and transparent governance.

The Internet offers tremendous opportunities, but these must be made accessible to all -- in ways that all can understand, by means that are cheap and easy.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

UNESCO raises awareness about challenges to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We ring the bell when violations occur. We promote

media and information literacy to increase access and ease the free flow of ideas. We support the expression of pluralism and cultural diversity in the media. And we work to widen access for all to information.

We need your help to succeed in this mandate. Your experience, your ideas and your views are vital.

George Orwell once wrote that “if liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.”

Freedom of expression means, indeed, the right to inform, whatever the context is, however difficult the situation might be.

Protecting this fundamental human right is a process without an end. The case must be continually argued, violation of this right should never be accepted, and States and societies have to be helped to move forward.

This is why we all are here.

I look forward to your views and thank you for listening.