

Introductory remarks

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Unfortunately, a problem on Air Baltic on Sunday evening prevented me from joining you today. The plane had technical issues, so they substituted it with a smaller craft and bumped me and 15 other passengers off the list. The next flight would have arrived too late for my scheduled interventions.

Nevertheless, from a distance, I would like to greet Madame Speaker of the Latvian parliament, the high level dignitaries at this opening session, fellow speakers here, and all participants.

UNESCO is delighted to see this milestone in the momentum signalled by this conference. We are also extremely pleased to be continuing our co-operation with the European Commission, the state of Latvia, and GAPMIL's European chapter. As well as all our friends here.

As many of you know, UNESCO last year had a terrific commemoration of World Press Freedom Day on 3 May, in this very venue. The Riga Declaration that resulted stated very clearly: "Competency in media and information literacy as well as open-minded and critical thinking skills are essential to ensuring that everyone is empowered in seeking, receiving, and imparting information and ideas, regardless of frontiers." The Declaration further called on UNESCO to enhance the development of our programmes on Media and Information Literacy.

Finally, the Declaration called for UNESCO to respond to the issue of hate speech by promoting media and information literacy and fact-based counter-speech, and by highlighting that any limitations on expression have to be necessary, proportionate and for reasons of preventing advocacy of incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, in line with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Just over 12 months later, we find ourselves taking forward these quality insights. Thank you again to Latvia for your sterling support for UNESCO's work, which includes financial support also to our media development work under our International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC).

And this is an especially timely event. We may not immediately see links between Brexit and its consequences for the need for MIL. Likewise, there are no simple connections between trying to secure the safety of journalists, forced migrations, violent extremism, global warming, big data and privacy concerns, new propaganda wars, upsurges in cyber-trolling and increased cyber-harassment against women and girls. We know too that there is not an explicit linkage to MIL in the documents of the Sustainable Development Goals, nor in the next phase of the World Summit on the Information Society.

On the other hand, we live in a world of great interconnectedness, and we also know that MIL should be a living and responsive practice. We have seen this in the evolution of the concept, from its origins in separated worlds of media and information, through to a composite perspective that recognizes the overlaps and convergences as well as distinctive, but inter-related dimensions. We have seen this in the Paris Declaration which fully embraced the emerging digital realities. We should begin to explore more systematically how MIL relates to the big issues of our time, not least the need to achieve Sustainable Development and knowledge societies. We need to unpack the value-add.

At least here, we all know that MIL is a meaningful alternative to the idea of censoring content under the rationale of protecting people from harmful messages.

We know accordingly that **protection** may have its place, but it makes sense to **prepare** people to deal with such content, which they will encounter even when there is filtering, blocking and banning. We further know that MIL is about building defences in the minds of people so that they can recognize how advertising works on their aspirations, how propaganda works on their emotions, and how news can be structured to normalize a certain world view. We know that MIL is about helping people to navigate their way through information proliferation, giving them the critical intellectual skills to evaluate and discern what comes across their radar. Nowadays, we know that MIL is also about knowing one's right to privacy, and to data protection, which are inevitably impacted by engagement with the digital world.

Increasingly, we also know that MIL is not only about how empowerment to best exercise our right to seek and receive information, whether online or offline. It is also about our right to impart information, and the way we interact proactively with content – whether by retweeting, pressing like, or as occasional or even full-on prosumers or journalists who generate a significant amount of content. MIL is about what ethics we follow, and the quality of our own messaging. What all this suggests is that we need to add to **protection** and **preparation**, the need for **prospects** for everyone, and especially youth, to exercise their right to free expression. MIL has to be very strong in promoting full freedom of expression – both in the access to information implied by the right to seek and receive, and in the right impart information.

Relevant to the world in which we currently live, is how this conception of MIL relates to identity. We need to understand how each of us fashions our identities through our engagement with media and information, with communications. It is a question of recognizing how others may attempt, deliberately or less so, to shape us in various ways. And it is a question about how we construct our identities in our roles as senders, not only as receivers, of messages.

In this regard, we also know increasingly that MIL is vital for how we deal with intercultural questions, because these are about how we define identity – not only who we are, but also who we are not. Identity politics worldwide seem, unfortunately, to be polarizing in many places into singular identities. In other words, I am who my religious affiliation defines me as. Or I am who my gender prescriptions assign me to be. In this context, we need to think carefully about MIL as a tool to build an identity of citizenship, because this can be linked to an exclusivist identity – "us and them" defined on the basis of nationality. If MIL is to be partly about developing consciousness of citizenship, let this be a notion of global citizenship issues.

At root, what I am encouraging us to think about is whether MIL can begin to also provide people with the basis to accept and manage multiple identities, and tolerance of other identities within a framework of respect for the human rights of dignity, privacy and freedom of expression.

In other words, it is a question that we could profitably think about – how central should questions of identity be, in regard conceiving, advocating and practicing MIL in contemporary conditions? And that leads us to the question of the MIL project not only within Europe, but also between Europe and other parts of the world.

With these brief thoughts, let me again thank the European Commission, Latvia, GAPMIL's European chapter, and the team at UNESCO, and all other participants here. The results of this important event will feed back into our work, and into our reporting to the 195 member states of UNESCO. There is a lot that we hope to learn from the discussions ahead.

At the heart of MIL