

COMMITTEE TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS
COMMONWEALTH PRESS UNION
INTER AMERICAN PRESS ASSOCIATION
INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BROADCASTING
INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE PERIODICAL PRESS
INTERNATIONAL PRESS INSTITUTE
NORTH AMERICAN BROADCASTERS ASSOCIATION
WORLD ASSOCIATION OF NEWSPAPERS
WORLD PRESS FREEDOM COMMITTEE

PRESS FREEDOM ON THE INTERNET

The members of the Coordinating Committee of Press Freedom Organisations present at the meeting on 21 November 2002 in Vienna, Austria, issued the following statement stressing the importance of preserving and extending press freedom on the Internet, particular in the context of the upcoming United Nations World Summit on the Information Society, scheduled for 2003 in Geneva; Switzerland, and 2005 in Tunis, Tunisia.

1. News media in cyberspace and via international satellite broadcasts should be afforded the same freedom of expression rights as traditional news media. Any text adopted by the World Summit on the Information Society should affirm this. A free press means a free people. Press freedom on the Internet must be a fundamental characteristic of this and of any new communication system.

2. This principle is embodied in UNESCO's Declaration of Sofia of 1997:

"The access to and the use of these new media should be afforded the same freedom of expression protections as traditional media."

This declaration, adopted by a broad cross-section of journalists from both East and West Europe, was formally endorsed by the member states of UNESCO at its General Conference in 1997.

3. A major priority must be implementation of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

"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."

That pledge, made by the international community in 1948, must be a living reality everywhere.

4. There are many forms of communication over the Internet, and it is important not to confuse them. News, for example, is different from such things as pornography, paedophilia, fraud, conspiracy for terrorism, incitement to violence, hate speech, etc., although there may be news stories about such problems. Such matters as those listed are normally covered in existing

national general legislation and can, if appropriate and necessary, be prosecuted on the national level in the country of origin.

No new legislation or international treaty is necessary.

5. Some countries that have advocated controls over the free flow of information across national frontiers have tried to justify such controls on political grounds, regional value systems or national information sovereignty.

Such controls are clearly in violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

6. Over the years, developing countries have complained of being unequal partners in world communication ability. The new information technologies afford just the opportunity for interactive and multi-way communication that these developing world critics have said they want.

For those in many countries, Article 19 is still a promise rather than a reality. The new communication technologies could go a very long way toward fulfilling the promise.

7. Those who seek answers to the so-called "digital divide" neglect to recall that previous communication technologies such as printing, radio and television also started in advanced, more developed countries and spread virtually throughout the world, largely thanks to natural market processes.

The rate of spread of each successive new communication technology accelerated radically. According to the International Telecommunication Union, it took 38 years for the first 50 million radio sets to be in place worldwide, 13 years for the first 50 million television sets, and just four years for the first 50 million Internet connections. There are now more than 10 times as many Internet connections worldwide.

8. Because general principles are at stake, there is concern that controls instituted for new communication technologies could "wash back" into controls over traditional news media. This would be regressive and tragic. Nothing that could work in this manner should be permitted at this Summit.

9. A number of proposals for regulation and controls now being made were made and rejected during past debate over now-discredited proposals for a "new world information and communication order." There are clearly those at work who seek to revive and assert for their own purposes such restrictive proposals in the new guise of countering alleged threats and dangers posed by new communication technologies.

These proposals must again be successfully resisted, just as they were earlier.

10. Many of the fears over the new communication technologies expressed by officials and politicians seem to reflect anxieties about the new and unfamiliar, which they do not control. Such anxieties often reflect ignorance on what the new communication technologies really are and of how they work. They can also reflect a fear of freedom.

Discussions of many alleged problems are often conducted on the basis of unproved assertions and speculations. Rigorously researched, hard data is missing to describe the supposed threats posed by the new communication technologies, with these unproven dangers used to justify the calls for controls.

11. If successful, proposals to control content and its dissemination through new information technologies would severely constrain their rapid spread and development.

12. In the broader freedom of expression context, existing international copyright regimes and intellectual property rights agreements are, generally speaking, an indispensable encouragement to creation and innovation. Those who seek to undermine such existing conventions on the grounds of free access would, in fact, succeed only in drastically reducing incentives for developing and distributing information.

13. Most people in the world continue to receive their news and information through traditional broadcast and print media and are likely to continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

14. The forthcoming World Summit on the Information Society provides both opportunities to broaden the reach of freedom of expression as well as dangers from those who would narrow it -- unthinkingly or deliberately.

15. Everyone involved in preparations for that summit in late 2003 in Geneva, and for the follow-up summit in 2005 presently scheduled for Tunis, should bear firmly in mind the need to maximize opportunities for extending press freedom and to resist the threats to restrict it.

To that end, civil society and all those engaged in news flows over the Internet must be an integral part of the preparations at every stage. This summit conference cannot be left to governments and technocrats alone.

16. The Coordinating Committee of Press Freedom Organisations calls for concerted effort to make preserving and extending the free flow of news and information in cyberspace a basic concern of the Summit.

News on the Internet is the same as news everywhere. New technology does not require any reconsideration of fundamental rights such as freedom of the press.

We call on delegates and others involved in the Summit process to: a) reject any proposal aimed at restricting news content or media operations, b) support inclusion of a clear statement of unqualified support for press freedom on the Internet, and c) include with action on any other subject that could be used restrictively a clear statement that the particular provision involved is not intended to involve any restriction on press freedom.

There must be press freedom in cyberspace.