World Press Freedom Day 2011

Welcoming Remarks

by

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Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome.

It is a great honour to be with you today to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration and to observe World Press Freedom Day 2011 in Washington, DC.

I thank you for joining us as we begin the first of three plenary sessions. As you can see in your programmes, each plenary will be followed by a series of equally titillating breakout sessions.

I promise to be brief. We only have one hour and we have a spectacular panel -- including Mr Frank La Rue, UN Rapporteur for Freedom of Opinion and Expression; Ms Karin Karkelar, Senior Editor at Freedom House; Ms Gwen Lister, Founder of the Media Institute of Southern Africa; and, Mr Eric Newton, Senior Adviser for the Knight Foundation.

Before I begin, I would like to thank those who have made this event possible, namely : 
The international development NGO IREX,

The Center for International Media Assistance at the National Endowment for Democracy,

The United Nations Foundation,

The Department of State,

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation,

Omidyar Network,

Open Society Foundations,

The Newseum,

The National Press Club

And I would also like to thank you all for joining us. I very much look forward to hearing your thoughts.

If yesterday evening’s opening session was any indication, we can expect a lively and substantive debate
in the days to come, especially in light of recent events in the Middle East and North Africa.

The Arab Spring provides a very real context for this morning’s plenary session on Press Freedom, during which we will be addressing two questions. “How far have we come?” and, “Where are we going?”

These questions do not lend themselves to simple or straightforward answers.

Although we may view the Windhoek Declaration in 1991 as a common point of departure, this does not imply that media freedom over the past two decades has evolved in a linear fashion. The media landscape has changed beyond recognition. However, certain truths remain unchanged, and today, just as it was pronounced in Namibia twenty years ago, freedom of expression and information are fundamental rights for the fulfilment of human aspirations.

As UNESCO’s Director-General Irina Bokova mentioned in her remarks during the opening session, today we face a great paradox. I would like to revisit this point for a moment.
In the 21st Century, new information communication technologies present individuals with unprecedented access to news and information, creating new potentials in promoting democracy and good governance and in combating corruption and wrong-doing.

At the same time, we must recognize that this access has been illegitimately restricted by some governments and that many new technologies can be manipulated to curtail the exercise of civil liberties by citizens.

So, what do we do? What can we do?

These are exciting times. We live in an era in which Twitter can be used to mobilize and organize activists who have sparked revolutions, in which bloggers bypass traditional outlets to join public discourse, and in which the threshold of fear is dissolved by the manifestation of the people’s will on social portals.

These tools have shifted the proverbial tipping point a bit closer to the disenfranchised and dispossessed masses.

And yet, we also live in an age when authoritarian regimes blackmail Internet Service Providers for user data, and construct mirror social networking sites to
deceive users into divulging their private information, all under the false pretences of security.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These issues underscore, in part, the importance of ensuring freedom of expression on the Internet on the same basis as for traditional forms of media—print, press, radio, and television.

At UNESCO, we are committed to promoting and securing these rights and freedoms in the digital realm.

As you may already know, UNESCO is the UN agency mandated to promote freedom of expression and its derivative, freedom of the press. A free press is a product of countless labour, such as enacting necessary media legislation, supporting professional training, maintaining editorial independence, and countering a culture of impunity, to name but a few.

When envisioning a free press, our minds might conjure the image of the intrepid reporter, or of the crusading journalist, playing a vital role in promoting accountability, rule of law, and democratization.

Indeed, a free press keeps us free.
With our freedoms inextricably linked, we mustn’t forget the significance of investigative journalism, which has grown exponentially since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Today, new media offer an array of tools that empower investigative journalists in the pursuit of their profession, which is a most welcome development. It is a craft that warrants continued support – in a non-compromising manner, of course.

A recent report by the Centre for International Media Assistance notes that funding of investigative journalism remains largely uncoordinated and episodic, making up only a small fraction of overall media development.

It is vital that the new tools made available are matched with skills – skills that emphasize adherence to standards, professional ethics, and reporting quality. Two of the questions posed today are ‘How far have we come?’ and ‘Where are we going?’ To these we can add, ‘How are we getting there?’

As for our discussion today - a survey of media freedom over the past two decades is no small feat. Thankfully, we are joined by several renowned experts and practitioners who are uniquely positioned to comment on
this matter. Freedom House has provided its detailed assessment of media freedom worldwide.

We have many questions to consider. How can new media platforms continue to expand information access? How do we pursue access and media literacy concurrently? What new barriers should we anticipate over the next decade? What can be done to avoid them?

I look forward to this discussion.

Each year, in cooperation and consultation with several media experts, NGOs, and intergovernmental agencies, the participants of World Press Freedom Day draft a document that fully reflects the challenges and potentials we face in ensuring press freedom. Toward this end, we would greatly appreciate your comments and contributions during the session of Tuesday, May 3, when the drafting of the Washington Declaration will be finalized.

Last year, in Australia, we adopted the Brisbane Declaration, which focused on the Freedom of Information and the Right to Know. As you know, this year’s theme is Media in the 21st Century: New Frontiers, New Barriers. The Washington Declaration will be brought to the attention of UNESCO Member States
during the next session of the General Conference for their endorsement.

As the Director-General of UNESCO, the UN Secretary General, and the UN Commissioner for Human Rights have said in their joint-statement, the media revolution is triggering new debates about freedom of expression and about the nature of regulation. We must not shy away from exploring all angles of these questions. We have to rise to the occasion and take on the responsibility of change.

Thank you for your attention.