

Remarks by Under-Secretary-General Shashi Tharoor
Global Forum for Media Development
Saturday 1 October 2005, 10.55
Hotel le Meridien, Amman, Jordan

Thank you for that kind introduction.

Your Majesty,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

With so many distinguished figures from the media here, let me start with something I've recently learned from the media: On the northern outskirts of Amman, near Ain Ghazal, archaeologists have unearthed the remains of a prehistoric settlement that some date to around 7200 BC.

They stand as proof that Amman is one of the cradles of human settlement, but also of something more. Along with the arrowheads and primitive structures, the remnants of artworks were also found—including some amazing monumental statues.

I am no archaeologist, and only an amateur historian, but—both as the UN's information official, and as a writer in my increasingly scarce spare time—I would venture to speculate. The fact that these statues were located in a public space leads me to guess that they were intended as a form of communication—as a means for that Neolithic community to make information it considered important available to its citizens.

So let me begin by telling you that it is a real pleasure to be here, in this ancient city of Amman, to talk about the issue that has clearly been vitally important to the people of this region since time immemorial (or at least since 7200 BC)—access to information.

And Amman is an entirely suitable place to discuss the role of the media in building stable, secure societies for more modern reasons, as well. Not only is it a modern thriving media capital in its own right—*Al Rai* and *Al Dustour*, for example, are first-class newspapers renowned the world over—it has served as the hub for the efforts of the UN and others to help neighboring Iraq establish the kind of media environment that we know is necessary to its stability and prosperity.

I am aware that among the more than 72 journalists who have lost their lives in Iraq were several Jordanians, including Tareq Ayoub of Al Jazeera. Our thoughts have been with them and their families as we follow the news from that country.

Our own UN media family has also suffered. Indeed, amongst the many valued colleagues we at the UN lost on that horrible day in August 2003 when our Baghdad headquarters was attacked, was a talented young information officer and journalist, Reham al-Farra, who trained on *Al Bilad* daily and *Chihan Weekly* in Jordan.

So deeply did the loss of Reham affect my Department—the UN's Department of Public Information—that we renamed one of our long-standing programs—a program that provides an opportunity for young journalists from developing countries to learn about the work of the

UN while acting as temporary UN correspondents for their media organizations—the Reham al-Farra Memorial Journalists’ Fellowship Program.

In our modern world, the claims of Amman as a bastion of media development are strong indeed.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

There is a saying in the English speaking world that “what you don’t know won’t hurt you.” I trust that there are few amongst this august collection of journalists and experts and public officials gathered here who would give much credence to that maxim.

Rather I think we can all accept that we are starting from the shared assumption that a free and independent media is an essential element of any stable and prosperous society. In the modern globalizing world, information sows the seeds of prosperity, and those without access to information are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to building a better future for themselves and for their children.

The UN has done some useful work in promoting media development, much of it in the form of partnerships between media organizers and the UN Development Program—UNDP—or the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization—UNESCO.

Currently, the United Nations Development Program is actively working on independent media development in dozens of developing nations. When providing advice on constitutional and legal system reforms in developing countries, UNDP stresses the importance of provisions for safeguarding an independent media. UNDP’s Governance Unit has a strong “access to information” program whereby governments are encouraged and helped to make public records and data and other information readily available through the internet and through local media, and journalists are advised how to locate it—and demand it, if necessary.

And as part of its work helping to organize elections in emerging democracies—UNDP and the UN’s Electoral Assistance Division work on an election about every week in some part of the world—UNDP country offices organize workshops for local journalists on covering elections before, during and after the vote count.

In this part of the world, UNDP’s Arab Human Development report has cast a harsh spotlight on the restrictions on independent media and strongly advocated for press freedom guarantees in the region. And in one of its largest programs, next door in Iraq, UNDP has worked with the Reuters Foundation to help Iraqi journalists create an editorially and financially independent internet-based news agency which is already used widely by scores of new newspapers and broadcasters in the country.

Beyond the work done by UN agencies, we at the UN itself have struggled with how best to aid the development of media, in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in East Timor, to take but two examples. Realizing that, in order to promote unity and peace and informed decisions-making, we need to provide people with reliable independent sources of information, we built radio networks and trained local people to operate them. In 1999 in East Timor we were forced to watch while everything we had created was destroyed. We had to

start again, almost from scratch, once order was restored. And in the DRC we have struggled to find ways to ensure the very successful Radio Okape can be sustained beyond our mission.

It is on the basis of our experience that I want to offer you not answers, but several parameters that I think could usefully guide your discussions.

Let me add another assumption that I think we can all accept as fact. We live in a globalizing world. More than forty years ago, in 1962, the United Nations' then-Secretary-General U Thant warned that an explosion of violence could occur as a result of the sense of injustice felt by those living in poverty and despair in a world of plenty.

Why do I recall this today? Because both the risk and the potential for a solution have increased. Nowhere is globalization more apparent than in the media. Television, radio, newspapers and magazines bring to our living rooms, and even our breakfast tables, glimpses of events from every corner of the globe. Any doubt I might have had about the reach and influence of global mass communications was dispelled when I happened to be in St. Petersburg in Russia for a conference and was approached by a Tibetan Buddhist monk in his saffron robes, thumping a cymbal and chanting his mantras, who paused to say "I've seen you on BBC!"

New communications technologies have shrunk the world, and—in a real sense—made it all one: one market, one audience, one people.

And yet I suspect that no one would argue with the proposition that information technology is not a magic formula that is going to solve all our problems. But we all know that it is a powerful force that can—and must—be harnessed if we are to deliver a tolerable standard of living to all people.

In the twenty-first century, globalization itself is not a matter of political choice, or even of economics. It is a fact. And in the long term, the new global economy is only sustainable if it spreads worldwide and responds to the needs and demands of all people. Whether we like it or not, a new global society is undoubtedly evolving.

However, we do have some choice over how it evolves. Will globalization be a divisive force—one that merely adds to the gap between haves and have-nots in this new global society—or a process that actually delivers on the promise made by UN's founders in the UN charter, that of "better standards of life in larger freedom"?

We must understand that information and communication technologies are the nerve system of this new society. A milestone was reached at the first-ever World Summit on the Information Society, a landmark United Nations conference held in Geneva in December 2003, and which is going to reconvene in Tunis in November for its second phase.

In their declaration of principles, participating countries reaffirmed "as an essential foundation of the information society, and as outlined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that everyone had the right to freedom of opinion and expression; that this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers."

But freedom of information is meaningless if people don't have the means to access this information. In our world—a world of satellite television, of cell-phones and of the internet—universal access to information is not just a highly desirable aim, but is also increasingly achievable.

When we speak today about media development, we do so standing on a platform of technology. I know we won't have much time to discuss technology at this forum, but it is clear that technology is the bridge between the right to information and its realization.

And yet this new world is not yet a safer or a more just world. There are many reasons for this, but one important element is that the information revolution, unlike the French Revolution, is a revaluation with a lot of liberty, some fraternity, and no equality. What we have at present is an information divide—an enormous gap between those with access to the benefits of this brave new world, and those without access.

This divide has many aspects. There is technological divide—the enormous gap in access that means that seventy percent of the world's internet users live in the 24 richest countries, and that 400,000 citizens of Luxemburg can count on more international bandwidth than Africa's 800 million citizens.

There is a gender divide: women and girls are yet to gain full advantage from changes that could ultimately redress the inequalities of centuries.

And there is a governance divide. Many people, companies and even governments in the developing world feel they have little control over this new global media that they know could have a powerful influence on their lives...and they are correct.

State-of-the-art media technology is most effective when the civil, political and governance structures of society serve as an enabling environment for media.

Equally important, there is also a content divide. The global media of the 21st century reflects the interests of its producers. Whether we are talking about television, radio or the internet, what passes for global media is really the media of the developed West. There is an occasional Third World voice, but it speaks a First World language.

As far back as the first Congo civil war in the 1960s, the journalist Edward Behr spotted a TV newsman in a camp of violated Belgian nuns, going around with his camera and calling out, "Anybody here been raped and speak English?" In other words, it is not enough to have suffered: one must have suffered and be able to express one's suffering in the language of the journalist. Inevitably, the globalized media has few authentic voices from the developing world.

Imagine if the only media to which you had access dismissed your most urgent—indeed life-threatening—concerns as side issues, summed up your culture as barbaric or peripheral, your religious beliefs as incomprehensible and threatening, and the fragility of your livelihood as of no great significance to the rest of the world. I suspect that some of you will have no trouble imagining that.

One way to change this is to increase the number and volume of voices from those parts of the world that are, as yet, recipients, rather than producers, of media.

And we know that this is possible. The success of Al Jazeera alone would serve to prove the point. And indeed Al Jazeera does not stand alone, with the impressive rise of Al Arabiya, Abu Dhabi television, and other Arabic-language networks.

A world in which it is easier than ever before to see or hear strangers at our breakfast table, through our daily dose of media, must also become a world in which it is easier than ever before to see strangers as essentially no different from ourselves.

For the alternative to the enhanced understanding that comes from media development may be the terrorism which has so dominated the headlines. If terrorism is to be tackled and ended, we will have to deal with the ignorance that sustains it. We will have to know each other better, learn to see ourselves as others see us, learn to recognize hatred and deal with its causes, learn to dispel fear, and above all just learn about each other.

Which leads, almost inevitably, to the key question we are confronting here. How do we best encourage the growth of the kind of media that adds to the sum of human knowledge and boosts opportunity in societies where such free expression has either never been the norm, or has been lost due to conflict or to systems of governance that suppress the media?

We are meeting in a part of the world where there has been a dramatic expansion in media, especially satellite television, and the growth of a huge pan-Arab market with multiple channels available almost everywhere in the Arab world. This has served as a force for promoting Arab unity, as programmers seek material that enlarges their market share across the Arab world, with more focus on regional and international issues rather than domestic ones. The imperatives of a large viewership, and generally low literacy, often means programs pitched at the lowest common denominator of entertainment; a similar phenomenon occurs in news, where the familiar narratives tend to be reinforced.

The challenge of media development in such an environment is to develop media that is attractive, so that viewers in a saturated market don't simply change the channel; credible, so that viewers keep coming back; authentic, in reflecting the views of the public to which it is addressed; and empowering, reaffirming a sense of responsible citizenship by reminding viewers of their rights and obligations.

These issues have come to the fore recently in discussions about how best to develop a media culture in Iraq. I fear that some of those discussions did not sufficiently feature the direct participation of Iraqis themselves and others with a genuine affinity to the history, culture, and traditions of the region.

But it is equally true that this particular project—the creation of free and independent media in a country where the head of the journalists' union had, for some years prior to the war, been the son of the dictator—has lent an urgency and a specificity that has long been lacking in discussions of the importance of the role of the media.

At some of these discussions, an interesting conflict emerged between those who wanted a quick and substantial effort to establish a free press, claiming that good institutions of governance would follow, and those who preferred to at least ignore, and at worst inhibit, the freedom of the press until sound mechanisms of governance were established. I believe there is both right and wrong in both positions.

Without questioning the role that the media has in promoting government transparency and accountability, we might ask ourselves which comes first—the institutions of good governance or a free press. I think this is a valid question. In many places not far from here, we have seen how the media can become a substitute for democratic political expression, with media talk shows serving as a facsimile (some might say a caricature) of genuine political debate in some societies. If journalists are not rewarded for being objective, and are not punished for fanning the flames, media can prove a disastrous alternative to responsible politics.

To say this is not to advocate censorship. Let me repeat once again that freedom of expression is an inalienable and immutable human right, set out in article 19 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And that an independent and credible media is essential to the enjoyment of fundamental human rights and essential to development, because I believe that those people and countries with access to information have far more chance of enjoying the fruits of development than those without. Freedom to seek, receive, impart, and use information is vital—that's why we are all here today.

But let us also not pretend that a thriving media is always a force for good. A free media can, sadly, sometimes prove to be "hate media." On 3 December 2003, three Rwandan media figures were sentenced to lengthy jail terms by the International Tribunal for Rwanda for their role in inciting their compatriots to kill Tutsis during the 1994 genocide. The three men were convicted of genocide, incitement to genocide, conspiracy, crimes against humanity, extermination, and persecution.

These convictions were the first of their kind since the Allied Tribunal at Nuremberg in 1946 sentenced Nazi publisher Julius Streicher to death for his anti-Semitic publication *Der Stürmer*. In its judgment, that Court affirmed: "The power of the media to create and destroy fundamental human values comes with great responsibility."

In the case of Streicher, it is possible to argue that this abuse of the power of the media was in the service of a tyrant. Tyrants and dictators have long known that controlling the information that people receive is a very effective way of controlling the people themselves. This was clearly not a free press.

But in Rwanda remember that even before the genocide began—in all its horror—the Rwandan president was assassinated, along with other representatives of a government that seemed inclined to seek peace. Radio Mille Collines served a terrible purpose, but it was not that of the government. I do not mean to imply that it was a truly independent media outlet; it was indeed the propaganda arm of the Hutu *genocidaires*." But non-government media is not always virtuous.

The role played by the media of both sides in fuelling conflict in the Balkans also comes to mind. And, as United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan has reported, the political violence that has wracked Côte d'Ivoire over the last few years owes something to the irresponsible conduct of "hate media" which, he explained, was "fuelling the tensions, [encouraging] xenophobia and inciting violent acts."

Even in countries with a long tradition of ensuring press freedom, the work of journalists and writers and commentators is not unfettered. There are laws against slander and libel—we may

not like the specifics of some of those laws, but I think few of us doubt that some legal restrictions are reasonable. As a US Supreme Court Justice once so eloquently put it, “Freedom of expression does not include the right to falsely cry ‘fire’ in a crowded theatre.”

Media professionals have acknowledged that when those laws and restraints don’t exist, their establishment must form part of our media development programs. But what about when the very courts themselves don’t exist? What about societies trembling on the brink of an apocalypse?

So here are my parameters.

First, if our efforts to assist with media development are to genuinely contribute to a better, safer, and more prosperous world, we must accept that there is no “one size fits all” for media content. Countries and societies struggling to rebuild need a media that has a local face and a local voice, and reflects a local understanding of the world. To be a force for good, the media must be “of the people,” and outsiders—even the most skilled and best-intentioned outsiders—cannot substitute. But they can help.

Second, although the establishment of a free and independent media will undoubtedly aid the creation of better institutions of governance, it is not enough to focus only on the media. The survival of a truly free and independent media cannot be divorced from the establishment of the social and political institutions of good governance.

Of course, the simple answer is that the two concepts—good governance and press freedom—can and must develop together, as part of an integrated approach to nation-building. But this raises some tricky questions about timing and priorities and allocation of resources that we ignore at our peril. Does it take the same amount of time to build a legal system and an independent judiciary as it does to train a journalist or set up a broadcast studio? Arguably not, but if media professionals are to take our responsibilities seriously, we must ask ourselves questions like these.

And finally, in a world where people fear a clash of civilizations, the need for tolerance and understanding in affirmation of our common humanity has never been stronger. And I believe that a pluralistic global media will play a significant role in fulfilling this need.

So it is not in any of our interests to provide support for the establishment of a second-class media. What assistance is offered must not simply be sustainable, it must also seek to provide the best possible chance for local voices to ultimately be heard across our globalized world. And if we can achieve this, I believe we will be contributing not just to peace in-country, but to global security.

As Socrates taught us, “there is only one good, knowledge; and only one evil, ignorance.” If we can help promote the vital exchange of ideas and information regardless of frontiers, the media can play its part to make possible not just the renewal of strife-torn countries, but the creation of a global civilization that is defined by its tolerance of dissent, its celebration of cultural diversity, and its insistence on fundamental, universal human rights.

But let us also remember that there cannot be just one standard, one style, one way of doing things. At the global level, the media must recognize that there exist, around us, many societies whose richness lies in their soul and not in their soil, whose past may offer more

wealth than their present, and whose culture is more valuable than their technology. Recognizing that this might be the case, and affirming that cultural distinctiveness is as central to humanity's sense of its own worth as the ability to eat and drink and sleep under a roof, is also part of the challenge before the media today.

The only way to meet this challenge is to preserve cultural freedom in all societies and to guarantee that individual voices find expression, and that all ideas and forms of media are able to flourish and content for their place in the sun. We have heard in the past that the world must be made safe for democracy. That goal is essential, and is increasingly being realized; but it is also time for all of us to work to make the world safe for diversity.

None of us has a monopoly over truth. In addition to my UN work, I am also, when I can find the time, an Indian novelist. So let me end by telling you an Indian story.

It is an old Indian story, from our ancient Puranas, about Truth. It seems that in ancient times a brash young warrior sought the hand of a beautiful princess. The king, her father, thought the warrior was a bit too cocksure and callow; he told him he could only marry the princess once he had found Truth.

So the young warrior set out on a quest for Truth. He went to temples and to monasteries, to mountaintops where sages meditated and to forests where ascetics scourged themselves, but nowhere could he find Truth.

Despairing one day and seeking refuge from a thunderstorm, he found himself in a dank, musty cave. There, in the darkness, was an old hag, with warts on her face and matted hair, her skin hanging in folds from her bony limbs, her teeth broken, her breath malodorous. She greeted him; she seemed to know what he was looking for. They talked all night, and with each word she spoke, the warrior realized he had come to the end of his quest. She was Truth.

In the morning, when the storm broke, the warrior prepared to return to claim his bride. "Now that I have found Truth," he said, "what shall I tell them at the palace about you?" The wizened old crone smiled. "Tell them," she said, "tell them that I am young and beautiful."

So Truth is not always true; but that does not mean Truth does not exist. In our quest for it, though, we must always be conscious that there are other ways of finding it, and that what we find might not be what we expect. But the process of getting to the truth is sometimes its own reward.

Thank you, and I wish you a successful conference.
