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UNESCO

Address by

Mr Alain Modoux

Assistant Director-General

for Freedom of Expression, Democracy and Peace

On the occasion of the AMIC Conference

Singapore, 1 July 2000
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted at the opportunity of speaking to you at this conference of the AMIC. For over 30 years, AMIC and UNESCO have cooperated in several areas, and their joint endeavors have been extremely relevant to the development of mass communication in the region. I am sure this collaboration will grow in the future, since our new Director General, Mr Koichiro Matsuura, has reiterated his firm commitment with freedom of expression and universal access to knowledge and information.

As he said in his installation address, on 15 November, “UNESCO must continue to champion free expression, and also to defend international diversity in the production and flow of cultural goods – while keenly working to democratize and facilitate access to information and knowledge in all forms. UNESCO thus notably addresses the crucial worldwide challenge raised by today’s emerging information society, along with all the social, cultural and ethical implications of electronic media. UNESCO task here includes dealing with the very unequal admittance to sources of information in the world”.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

As you all know, the electronic revolution in communications is changing the world. The fast development of these technologies holds out new prospects, but also new risks. This phenomenon will have a tremendous impact on all areas of life in the coming years. In an interview published in March by The Straits Times, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew said, “the revolution is going to be real. It is going to transform the way we do business, the way we live, the way we buy and sell, and the way the world is”.

The information superhighways provide us with a valuable tool for development, since they are extremely powerful means for the dissemination of data at a relatively modest cost. By virtue of its worldwide reach, Internet disregards geographical, cultural and customs barriers. It opens the way for a world society which is free to express itself and can be freely informed. It also helps in bringing people closer together. All these aspects are essential prerequisites for promoting peace and democracy, which is UNESCO fundamental mission.

However, a basic level of literacy is necessary to be able to use Internet services, and adult literacy rates worldwide are still low. In South Asia the
literacy rate is around 45 per cent for adults. Another problem is that the
Internet is mostly built on existing telecommunication infrastructure, and
where this does not exist Internet services cannot be introduced. Therefore, in
order to profit from this spectacular technological breakthrough, it is crucial
for developing countries to be able to foster literacy and to build the
necessary telecommunication infrastructure.

We all agree today that Internet and multimedia techniques are powerful
tools for promoting development. Distance learning, telemedicine, or access
to government information and community networks can improve the lives of
millions of people, particularly in the countryside. The Internet is also a
source of information in many other areas, from agriculture to urban
development, and from tourism to marketing and advertising.

But we must bear in mind that while Internet services are now being
introduced in most countries, they are far from widespread amongst the
population. Most people do not earn enough to own a computer or to get
connected to the Internet. It operates primarily for the benefit of those who
are already educated and well informed, and therefore can afford access.
Under those circumstances, new technologies play a key role in widening the
already yawning gap between the info-poor and the info-rich. They can also
exacerbate culture shock and aggravate social, economic and political confrontations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the Information Age, traditional media have to address new challenges. Perhaps this is because it is harder to rethink how to do things than it is to create them from scratch. We have been forced to scrap systems, processes, habits and assumptions that are ingrained. Publishers are no longer the only conduits for publication. Abstracting-and-indexing companies can’t normally deliver text, and, because they are so labor-intensive, they deliver theirs products too slowly, for a world used to instant gratification.

We are used to a society in which information —whether in politics, journalism or education—flows from the top down. In traditional journalism, for instance, the editor decides what to cover, the reporters gather the facts, and the news, after been shaped into a story, is distributed to the public. But Internet offers the possibility of reversing this process. Anyone can originate a story and disseminate it to all Net users, and many newsgroups in the Web are doing it faster and more accurately than the best newspapers. And unlike traditional media, the Internet is a two-way medium. Unlike radio, television or the print press, it enables users to receive and originate information on real
time. Right or wrong, many societies feel threatened as this revolutionary force is changing social mentalities all over the world.

But it will be wrong to think of the Internet technology as a Terminator who is going to eradicate all other media. The history of communications shows that new technologies seldom obliterate existing ones. When commercial radio began broadcasting, back in the 1920's and 1930's, some pundits predicted the end of the Gutenberg Era. Books, they said, were obsolete and people will no longer waste time reading them. Instead, they will listen to their favorite programs. It never happened that way. Indeed, the editorial industry grew healthier in the following years. Two or three decades later, television became the new "cultural threat", the powerful medium that was going to erase both radio stations and publishing houses from the face of the Earth. We all know what happened. The truth is that each of these new technologies has found its public, and that they have reinforced each other, in a very creative way.

So, rather than fearing a cyberculture which would blur individual differences, we should develop tools that allow us to promote cultural diversity through a greater freedom of expression. Electronic media pose certain dangers, but the risk lies in the limited ways the technology is applied, rather than in any inherent limitation of the technology itself.
Computers have much more to offer than being storage mechanisms for cultural images to create virtual museums. They can help us trace the evolution of international dimensions within a given national culture, to understand the links between visual and performance arts, and to appreciate the relative role of each of their elements. It can help us to record particulars as well as universals, and in the process stimulate the elusive quality of uniqueness. They can help us in raising public awareness about the invisible aspects of culture.

Ladies and gentlemen,

A recent survey carried out by MasterCard International among 5,500 middle-class consumers in 13 Asia-Pacific countries concluded that 62% of Thais believed that the Internet has changed their lifestyle and habits. Hong Kongers appeared to feel the impact the most, with 84% reporting an altered lifestyle as a result of the Internet revolution. More than 60% of Japanese, Filipinos and Indonesians also claimed that their lifestyles are different since they discovered the benefits of going online. However, 20% said that they were even spending more time with their families as a result of Internet, while only 12% said they were spending less time together.
This survey illustrates some of the deep changes that the Internet revolution is bringing about. As an intergovernmental organization, UNESCO respects and upholds cultural diversity, as well as the right of each people to elaborate and enforce its own laws, in a democratic way. But UNESCO also promotes freedom of expression as a fundamental value, one which guarantees many other rights and freedoms. As such, it is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose Article 19 proclaims that "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". These principles are universal. They apply to all human beings, without distinction of race, sex, religion or language. Therefore, all governments must adhere to them.

In accomplishing its constitutional mandate, UNESCO will constantly uphold the principle of universal access to information. No area, however remote, no population group, however underprivileged, should be deprived of access. Libraries, archives and documentation centers have a vital role to play in this regard. But the Organization must also ensure that the ethic, legal and socio-cultural aspects of the information society are duly taken into account. Among them, cultural diversity and freedom of expression are fundamental.
Asian countries, which have experienced an extraordinary social and economic development in the past decades, are particularly well prepared to profit from the Internet revolution. They have the human capital, the risk-taking culture and the political will to chart new paths into the New Economy. But as in any other region, change and continuity will have to go hand in hand, if social stability and good governance are to be preserved.

As it has always done in the past, UNESCO will help you face the challenges and take the opportunities of the Information Society, by advancing the mutual knowledge and understanding of your people; by promoting the free flow of ideas; by fostering education at all levels and by devising new methods for preserving culture and the arts. Our expertise and capacity for analysis and anticipation is at your disposal, to help balance the impact of high technology and enable science to serve society in a clearly defined ethical framework.