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The role of the media in intercultural dialogue

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

**7th debate of the 2008 European Year of Intercultural
Dialogue"**

Brussels, 5 November 2008

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be with you here tonight and I would like to thank especially my colleague Commissioner Jan Figel for giving me the opportunity to open and hopefully to enrich the final Brussels debate in the context of the European Year of the Intercultural Dialogue.

Throughout the year you have been debating and discussing multilingualism, intercultural education, the role of art in migration and integration and the interreligious dialogue. The final debate is dedicated to the role of the media in this context. I would not go as far as to say that media are the overarching subject including all the subjects I have just mentioned. I would argue though that the media have an important role in all these issues. The media give us the opportunity to enjoy many different languages even without travelling to different countries. The media enable us to spread information about different cultures and societies in many languages and hence to make them accessible to a wide international public. The European Commission is supporting multilingual access to cultural heritage through the project "Multimatch". This project focuses on multilingual information retrieval for cultural objects in different formats: text, images, audio, video. The system will be

designed not only to support diverse user classes but also to assist cultural heritage institutions to disseminate their content widely and to raise their visibility.

In the field of education new digital media devices, such as internet platforms and educational games, give young people the opportunity to get in touch with different cultures in a very enjoyable way. Let me give you an example: the European initiative "eCircus" is a project in the area of technology-enhanced learning. It looks at how ICTs support certain aspects of the learning process: e-CIRCUS is investigating how role-play, narrative engagement and empathy support cognitive and emotional learning processes in complex situations. It is testing this in an interactive 3D environment which is populated by characters with autobiographical memory, individual personalities and improvisational capabilities. One of the example topics is refugee integration in schools, as this is seen as a socially sensitive issue in which empathy and emotional engagement are key factors.

Finally, even for the arts and the interreligious communication, the media is an indispensable way of expressing opinions and views and of making these accessible for other communities. In this sense media are in itself a form of intercultural dialogue. Media cannot be restricted to distribution of information; it is

also about communication between individuals or between organisations and communities. Long before the birth of the internet, Web 2.0 and social networking, intellectuals in the late 1920s, such as Berthold Brecht, had a vision of the media and its political and social potential - even though he was only talking about radio at the time : *"The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him."*

Relating people of different cultures instead of isolating them, enhancing a respectful exchange between individuals, groups and organisations with different cultural backgrounds is to me the core of intercultural dialogue.

The European Commission is at the forefront of promoting integration of ethnic minorities and inter-cultural dialogue. Media and ICT policy can contribute in manifold ways. I would like to present to you just a few initiatives, which the European Commission has launched in recent years.

But before that, let me briefly set the political scene. The promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue is a number one priority of the European agenda for culture adopted as a Commission Communication in May 2007 and

subsequently endorsed by Ministers of Culture in November 2007 and by the European Council in December 2007. This is directly linked to the implementation of the UNESCO Convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions. This UNESCO Convention on cultural diversity reflects an international consensus, a first on this important issue, on a number of guidelines and principles related to cultural diversity. It recognises the specificity of cultural goods and services such as audiovisual works and legitimises domestic and international cultural policies. The Commission believes that it will boost the inclusion of cultural diversity in the global agenda and it is committed to working with interested parties with this objective in mind.

In this context, the European audiovisual sector has a key role to play. It is one of the principal vectors for conveying the Union's common and shared fundamental social and cultural values to Europeans and especially young people. Community support, such as the MEDIA Programme, is designed to enable the European audiovisual sector to promote intercultural dialogue.

The focus of the MEDIA programme is the European Union. But intercultural dialogue and exchange do not stop at the borders of the European Union. In order to widen the scope of international cooperation in the audiovisual sector, the

European Parliament adopted, on 13 December 2007, a preparatory action MEDIA International focusing on developing European Union relations with third-country audiovisual players. The first call for proposals was very successful. I am happy that we received so many different and innovative projects. Let me give you just a few examples. We will support a cinema network of 52 cinemas including cinemas from 19 different third countries. These cinemas will screen European films and films from third countries. This is a very easy and most effective way of making the stories and lives of people with different cultural backgrounds accessible. Cinema has always been a door opening on to different countries and continents.

Another way of boosting the exchange of cultures is to bring together young professionals and to train them on concrete film projects. Spending an intense period of training together gives them a platform to get to know different views, to learn from each other and to experience the different cinematographic languages in different cultures. We have experienced this effect with the MEDIA programme and also with the ERASMUS Mundus programme that supports cooperation and exchange of universities and students between Europe and third countries: Joint training builds sustainable and strong networks between professionals from different cultural backgrounds and fosters future cooperation.

The proposal for a possible MEDIA Mundus programme would follow the preparatory Action, from 2011 onwards.

The MEDIA MUNDUS programme would bring added value in three particular ways: first, it would strengthen the competitiveness of the European audiovisual sector on the world stage; second, it would encourage cultural diversity and third, it would complete the existing European funding schemes by adding a world-wide dimension. Let me make a short remark on the two main objectives of such a programme: "Strengthen cultural diversity" and "Strengthen the competitiveness of the audiovisual sector." We strongly believe that these two aims are complementary to each other. Cooperation between European and third- country professionals will lead to a better knowledge of different market structures and can help to overcome structural deficits. It can also open new sources of financing and increase co-production through networks and training programmes. Hence, it can help to increase the market share of European audiovisual works in the world and bring films from third countries to our cinemas. At the same time networking and cooperating encourage the exchange of different cultures of film-making and leads to greater knowledge and diversity.

From the audiovisual sector, where the link to intercultural dialogue is more evident, I would like to pass on to the role of the ICT in cultural diversity.

Europe still faces great challenges in terms of integration. As you have concluded in the last debate, education plays a central role in achieving unity in the EU. Furthermore, employability, education, accessibility of services and ICT are key factors for a better integration. As more people make use of ICT, the digital gap for those left behind gets bigger. More than 50% of Europeans do not regularly use computers. The younger generations from diversified cultural origins are usually and remarkably at the forefront of the information society. However, they are affected by digital exclusion, particularly those who suffer from poor family income, who live in poorly served geographical areas, who have not received a good education, and who are perceived as "different", for their ethnic origin, their behavioural orientation, and their different physical or intellectual abilities.

The European Commission aims to bridge that gap. The objective of our e-Inclusion Initiative for instance is 'an inclusive information society for all' with a specific attention to youth and cultural diversities.

For this purpose we have launched a large e-Inclusion Awareness Campaign that will culminate in the e-Inclusion Ministerial Conference in Vienna in December 2008. This conference will bestow awards on the best e-Inclusion practices. One award is dedicated to better integration of

culturally diversified communities in the knowledge and information society.

To give you an impression of the various projects, I will just quote two examples from the medal winners in the e-Inclusion Awards for ICT and Cultural Diversity:

The "ITpreneurs" from the Netherlands:

ITpreneurs develops innovative technology solutions for cultural and social issues. "Nederlands aan het Werk" prepares immigrants for work, learning and family life in Dutch society.

The Milton Keynes Council in the UK:

"ConnectMK/DigitalMK" supports people on low incomes and those from excluded groups in improving their life situations through the use of digital technology. Initiatives range from distributing low-cost PCs and providing tele-health initiatives to improving the accessibility of online public services.

Furthermore, the European Commission has funded a number of projects to increase the availability of educational content on-line by promoting digital libraries and the digitisation of our rich and diverse cultural heritage. Digital libraries are a key instrument for intercultural dialogue as a learning and information resource for millions of Europeans and people from outside Europe. An outstanding project in this context is certainly the "EUROPEANA": the digital European library

creates a single access point for the collections of Europe's different libraries, historical and audiovisual archives and museums, giving Europe's citizens wider access to their own and to other cultures. I am proud to announce that EUROPEANA will be officially launched as a prototype Website on 20 November 2008. Already accessible at the launch will be two million digitised objects, including film material, photos, paintings, audio, maps, manuscripts, books, newspapers and archival documents from Europe's museums, archives and libraries. By 2010, EUROPEANA will be a full service, and the number of digital items accessible will far exceed the 6 million originally envisaged. The creation of EUROPEANA is the result of a strong commitment from European libraries, museums and archives, organised through the European Digital Library Foundation.

This was the final stop of my short voyage through the many and manifold projects of the European Commission in the field of media and intercultural dialogue. I believe that these simple facts and figures already create a strong argument for the importance of the media in the context of intercultural dialogue. The European Commission will continue to explore the potentials of media and ICT for better integration and better communication between cultures. Europe is diversity of cultures and media is the tool to make that visible and accessible.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you very much for your attention.