Free, independent and pluralistic media
recognized as an essential element of the Information Society
Report on the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society
(WSIS, Geneva, 10-12 December 2003)

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1. The official texts adopted at the Summit

It was only the day before the opening of the Summit that a final consensus was achieved on the Declaration of Principles and the Action Plan (the texts are available at http://www.itu.int/wsis/).

The Declaration of Principles contains a specific Chapter (B9) which recognizes the role of the media. In this Chapter, governments reaffirm their commitment to the principles of freedom of the press and freedom of information, as well as the principles of the independence, pluralism and diversity of media. The text also states that diversity of media ownership should be encouraged, "in conformity with national law, and taking into account relevant international conventions". ¹

The Plan of Action sets a number of indicative targets which may serve as global references for improving connectivity (B). One of the targets is "to ensure that all of the world's population have access to television and radio services" (point 6(h)). Under the action lines, there is a specific Chapter on the media, recognizing their role as an important contributor to freedom of expression and plurality of information (C9). Individual action lines include the development of guarantees for the independence and plurality of the media in domestic legislation (point 24(b)) and the reduction of international imbalances affecting the media (point 24(f)). Others concern partnerships between media professionals in developing and

¹ See point 55. Other parts of the Declaration which are directly relevant to the media are points 4 (on freedom of expression, to some extent complemented by points 5 and 18), 44 (on the need for open and interoperable standards) and 52-54 (on cultural and linguistic diversity and local content).
developed countries (especially in the field of training), promotion of a balanced and diverse portrayal of women and men by the media, and encouragement to traditional media to bridge the knowledge divide.\textsuperscript{2}

This outcome is fairly positive, and certainly much better than could have been expected.

At the very beginning of the preparatory work in 2002, many governments and the ITU almost exclusively focused on communications infrastructure and the Internet, paying little attention to content issues and leaving media issues completely aside. Since then it has been possible gradually to raise awareness of cultural and media issues, starting with the various regional conferences and declarations, by providing input into the work of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) and by ensuring the active support of some governments (in particular Switzerland, as the host country) and parts of the UN system (especially UNDPI and UNESCO). A joint platform by the World Broadcasting Unions (see below) provided the common basis for worldwide lobbying.

However, during the third meeting of the PrepCom in September 2003, the question of whether and, if so, how to include the media in the official texts, and in particular the reference to freedom and pluralism of the media, suddenly proved to be one of the most contentious issues of the WSIS. At that stage, a group of countries, including China, Cuba and some Arab countries, signalled basic disagreement with the draft texts on the media and on freedom of expression, and the only sentence that was not contested at the time was the one which said that traditional media will continue to have an important role in the information society ....

It was also at that stage that certain worthwhile references in the draft texts prepared by the Secretariat (for example, concerning the need to transform state media, where they still exist, into public services enjoying editorial independence, or to take measure against excessive media concentration) were abandoned in the interests of achieving a compromise. Despite this, the situation remained blocked, and it was mainly thanks to the Swiss delegation's tenacity that the Chapter on the media was not simply deleted.

Notwithstanding these "losses", the official texts finally adopted still take up many of the proposals made by civil society organizations involved in the preparation of the Summit and, in particular, by the "media caucus" in which the EBU played an active part. Three points highlighted by the media caucus and not ultimately retained in the official texts - i.e. the specific and crucial role of public service broadcasting and community media in ensuring the participation of all in the information society, the need for state-controlled media to be transformed into editorially independent organizations, and the need for legislation preventing excessive media concentration - now feature in the \textit{Civil Society Declaration to the World Summit on the Information Society} (available at \url{http://www.geneva2003.org/wsis/index_c01_1_02.htm}).\textsuperscript{3}

\textsuperscript{2} Action lines relevant to the media are also to be found in other Chapters, e.g. in points 9(l) (on the promotion of the joint use of traditional media and new technologies) and 23 (on cultural and linguistic diversity and local content).

\textsuperscript{3} See, in particular, the Chapters on cultural and linguistic diversity (2.3.1), the role of the media (2.3.2) and the ethical dimensions (2.4.1).
2. The World Electronic Media Forum and the Broadcasters' Declaration

The World Electronic Media Forum (Geneva, 9-12 December 2003) was one of the most successful official side events of the WSIS. For four days, heads of world media met at this high-profile event, which was broadcast live in large parts of the world, in order to highlight the various contributions of broadcasting to the Information Society. Over 600 participants from more than a hundred countries discussed such issues as media freedom, world violence and media violence, and the setting of the world's agenda. Workshops spread over two days with issues such as cultural diversity, public service broadcasting and quality certification in broadcasting and the Internet. (More information is available at the official website http://www.wemfmedia.org.)

The World Electronic Media Forum (which succeeded the former UN Television Forum) was co-organized by the UN Department of Public Information (UNDPI) together with the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and Switzerland, as the host country and main sponsor of the Forum (through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, SDC).

The Forum opened with a speech by Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the United Nations, which gave the EBU President, Mr Arne Wessberg, the opportunity to present him with the Broadcasters' Declaration on behalf of the World Broadcasting Unions (WBU), i.e. public and commercial broadcasters worldwide. This Declaration, which was developed further at the Forum by media leaders from all continents, stresses the need to respect and promote freedom of expression, freedom and pluralism of the media, and cultural diversity, and underscores the crucial role of radio and television in ensuring social cohesion and development in the digital world. It also includes a paragraph on public service broadcasting, its independence and its role of ensuring access to information, knowledge, culture and entertainment for all citizens.

In his opening address to the World Summit the following day, Mr Kofi Annan highlighted the role of media organizations as both content creators and essential watchdogs, emphasizing the importance of media freedom for development, democracy and peace, and making a reference to the World Electronic Media Forum and the Broadcasters' Declaration. He also promised to send the Declaration to governments worldwide.

The World Electronic Media Forum was wound up by Mr Shashi Tharoor, the UN Under-Secretary General for Communications and Public Information. The media, which, at the outset, had been sidelined in the WSIS discussions, had finally taken centre stage. The next rendezvous will be in Tunis, where the second part of the Summit will be taking place on 16-18 November 2005. The report of the Forum will provide the initial input for that second phase.

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4 The Declaration is available at the EBU website under http://www.ebu.ch/departments/legal/pdf/leg_pp_wsis_declaration_broadcasters_091203.pdf
5 At the initiative of the EBU, agreement among all World Broadcasting Unions on a common text for the World Summit had been achieved just in time for the second PrepCom meeting, in February 2003.