

**Address by the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Eamon
Gilmore T.D., to the Royal Irish Academy Conference for International
Affairs 2011 on “Democratisation and New Media”**

Dublin, 25 November 2011

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to have this opportunity to address the RIA Conference for International Affairs 2011, whose subject is “Democratisation and the New Media”. I wish to thank Professor Drury and his staff for once again choosing a highly relevant and topical subject for discussion, and for putting together such an interesting programme involving key experts and practitioners.

The Royal Irish Academy, as we know, has a long history of discussion and debate between scholars of diverse backgrounds and interests. With past members such as Edmund Burke and Maria Edgeworth, we can be sure that this is not the first occasion on which theories of democracy and democratisation have been expounded within the Academy. Nor is this the first examination within these walls of issues relating to the media. However, I note that the original royal charter declared the aims of the RIA to be the promotion and investigation of sciences, of “*polite literature*” and of antiquities. I am not sure that the term “polite literature” is the best description of the work of today’s media, whether in this country or elsewhere, but we will not quibble about that!

Usually, when embarking on discussion of a new subject of any kind, we like to be clear about definitions. But, as even a quick *Google* or *Bing* search will tell you, there is no agreed definition of “new media”. I would guess that most people, if asked, would probably say that the term new media refers to digital media, perhaps the internet, or, even more specifically, to social networking platforms such as Facebook or Google+, or to micro-blogging platforms like Twitter. But what then about e-mail? Surely that is a new medium, but does it fit into the generally understood model of new media? Can we identify a common characteristic shared by all new media? And what distinguishes such media from “old media” or “traditional media”?

From the earliest time that human beings have been able to communicate, most communication has been based on one-to-one interpersonal contact, primarily taking the form of personal conversation. Over time, new innovations, such as postal systems, the telegraph, the telephone, and, in our lifetimes, e-mail, have facilitated such interpersonal contact over ever-increasing distances, and at ever-greater speeds.

New technologies down the centuries also permitted the emergence of new forms of mass communication, no longer *one-to-one*, but *one-to-many*. The invention of the printing press late in the 15th century finally ensured that literacy went beyond a cloistered elite, spreading culture and knowledge to new audiences. And in the past two centuries, the emergence of new forms of audio-visual media, notably cinema, radio and television, completed the circle, expanding the reach of news and information to all citizens, including the illiterate.

Mass media share one obvious but crucial characteristic: what we read, hear or watch is decided by others, whether book publishers, newspaper editors, or TV and radio programmers and editorial boards. We are all passive consumers. Developed democracies like our own have of course rightly identified the need for checks and balances to protect media pluralism and the rights of individuals – independent bodies such as competition authorities, press councils and broadcasting authorities. Unfortunately, in less-developed democracies, this is not always the case. State media monopolies remain in place and content is often dictated by Government, or by informal and unknown elites.

Imagine then a new type of media which combines the best – or some might say the worst – of interpersonal and mass media, and then we begin to see the revolutionising power of “new media”, and its defining characteristic, its *interactivity*. The advent of “new media” represents a radical, even bewildering, shift in terms of who is in control of information. We are witnessing the evolution of a universal network of audio, video, and electronic text communication that is blurring the distinction between interpersonal and mass communication and between public and private communication.

And once we understand that this is a constant evolution, we come to appreciate that we do not actually need a definition of new media. What is important is that we understand the crucial role of all types of media in society. A free, uncensored and pluralist media is essential in any society to ensure freedom of opinion and expression. Freedom of expression constitutes a basic building block for an open and free society. It is necessary for the

empowerment of citizens and it is incumbent upon the State, civil society and the international community to work for its protection. In particular, the free communication of information and ideas about public and political issues between citizens and elected representatives is essential. It should also be borne in mind that the right to freedom of expression can, on occasion, include views that offend, shock or disturb, although there are limits, which I shall discuss later.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Although they are not interchangeable, new media would not exist without the internet and its spin-offs: smartphones, tablets, and other devices which facilitate access to a global communications network. In little more than 20 years, the internet has been transformed from a tool largely used by academics and techies into a vital platform, one that is central to our daily lives. And one which is used by our citizens to exercise their fundamental right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds. It is also inextricably linked to so many other basic human rights: the right to freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of the media, freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly, to name but a few.

The ability to access information instantaneously has disrupted traditional societal structures and changed how we, as individuals, relate to Governments and to public administrations. It brings Governments closer to the citizens through e-government, with increased transparency, accountability and participation in policy-making. It allows citizens to overcome State monopolies on the supply of news and other information, reinforcing media pluralism. And, as we have seen in North Africa and the Middle East in the past year, the emergence of Web 2.0 and new media have now allowed citizens to become journalists themselves. We can all now participate in the construction of more democratic societies. And these new technologies have been of particular benefit to groups which were traditionally marginalized by the mass media, such as young people and minorities.

This year, 2011, was the year in which the idea of new media supporting democratisation might be said to have gone viral. The world witnessed a master class — predominantly taught by Arab youth — in how to use new media to spread information about political dissent, to galvanise support and to create momentum to drive democratisation forward. New media helped to mobilise the people to call for justice, equality, accountability and better respect for human rights.

Already, complex and double-edged lessons on how new media and democratisation interrelate are emerging from the experiences in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain and elsewhere. And, even at this early stage, some tentative pointers can be drawn.

First, the Arab Spring has shown us that new media are now undeniably an effective and transformational part of the democratisation toolkit.

The uprisings have shown us how, for example, social media can — more widely and swiftly than ever before — circulate evidence that there are large numbers of people calling for reform. In doing so, social media can counter official silence about pro-democracy protests and government repression. In Tunisia, shocking mobile phone images of repression in rural towns helped to convince the urban population that the pro-democracy cause was worth supporting. In Syria, videos of atrocities have ensured that the Assad regime has not managed to keep its suppression secret, despite extensive restrictions including a ban on foreign media.

In addition, social media provided nimble yet robust networks for pro-democracy workers to discuss and organise political action in societies where such outlets are limited. In Egypt, Wael Ghonim's hugely popular "We are all Khaled Said" page, named after a blogger who was beaten to death by police, initially began as a forum for sharing information on state wrongs which were not being reported on state-controlled television and newspapers. As the movements in Tunisia and Egypt grew, social media helped the protest movements to reach a consensus and to plan next steps at each juncture in their unprecedented, fast-moving and unexpected revolts.

Spreading information and political networking are just two of the most important ways in which social media can help those fighting for democratic freedoms, allowing individuals to exercise their fundamental freedoms online when it is not possible for them to do so offline. Just as the expansion of the railway network in Russia at the turn of the 20th century facilitated the spread of revolutionary ideas, the internet is the catalyst, but not the motivation, for political change. The motivation for these monumental changes was the undemocratic and often brutal nature of the regimes themselves.

We must also remember that the toolkit for democratisation includes more traditional forms of media and communication, and will continue to do so. Pan-Arab television channels Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya were pivotal in spreading the news of the Arab Spring uprisings.

These channels broadcast mobile phone video clips of protests to an older generation who only believed in a protest movement's power when they saw it covered on TV. Al-Jazeera's editorial stance was also influential, in acknowledging that these were broad-based people's movements rather than isolated grudges about unemployment (as the official media contended). Like social media, pan-Arab channels also played a vital role in spreading news and ideas about the democratisation uprisings *between* countries, from Tunisia to Egypt and onwards.

The rest of the world was transfixed by the events unfolding in North Africa and the Middle East. And while the more tech-savvy used new media platforms such as YouTube to stay in touch with events, most of us watched on TV or read about it in our newspapers. Here in Ireland, the content shown on news channels was increasingly sourced from citizen journalists on the ground, with the help of companies like *Storyful*, who seek to vet such material for authenticity in accordance with standard journalistic practices. This material would not have been available to us on our TV screens even 5 years ago.

Meanwhile, face-to-face contacts, telephone conversations, and other means of communication will continue to be vital in struggles for democratic freedoms. As any politician will tell you, nothing beats personal contact in politics. Wael Ghonim and other pro-democracy advocates promoted their cause in person around the poorer neighbourhoods of Cairo. They worked closely with the Egyptian labour unions and Muslim Brotherhood's traditional networks, before and alongside their online work. Indeed, Egyptian society's highly efficient verbal "grapevine" was vital in passing on information during the uprising. When former President Mubarak's authorities largely shut down the internet for a few days, the "grapevine" helped to ensure that the uprising did not stop.

A second early lesson of the Arab Spring is that new media act as a *catalyst* for individuals to exercise their right to freedom of expression. Together with traditional media, they can transform a political struggle, and thereby help individuals to realise a whole range of other human rights. During the Libyan uprising, we often saw words such as "Freedom" written in English on the open palm of a Libyan woman's hand or scrawled on a banner. Those calling for political rights now know that, even though they might not have access themselves, their words can be transmitted to the outside world via mobile phone followed by Twitter or Facebook. Syrians record the shooting of unarmed civilians by the Syrian security forces in the hope that they can smuggle these images out to be transmitted world-wide via YouTube

or other new media channels. The Arab street is fully aware that the international community can be a vital ally in their struggle by adding pressure to reform. New media also open up a role for activists outside a country to assist a pro-democracy movement by sharing information and highlighting abuses round-the-clock, as expatriates did during Tunisia's Jasmine revolution.

New media have also impacted greatly on the ways in which traditional non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operate. As the distinction between the creators and consumers of news content becomes increasingly blurred, NGOs have been forced to re-examine their strategies and the ways in which they interact with policy makers and the public. NGOs work by conveying information on abuses to policymakers who have the means to take action. Whether large global NGOs such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, or small local civil society groups, they all now have the power to reach their target audiences directly through Twitter feeds and video links posted on online profiles.

A third, emerging lesson of the Arab Spring is that new media can also be used to *counter* democratisation. Pro-democracy movements from now on will not have the huge advantage of surprising their autocrats by using social media. Authoritarian regimes can also use the internet to help their cause, by monitoring, identifying and targeting individuals for exercising their right to freedom of expression, such as the right to be critical of the Government or of political leaders. In Iran, the authorities post pictures of protestors online and invite the public to anonymously identify them. In Syria, information on pro-democracy sites is reportedly used to detain dissidents who become extremely vulnerable if the authorities manage to link them to a pro-democracy website or social network page.

Unfortunately, these actions confirm a general trend. For a number of years now, human rights organisations have been reporting increasing restrictions on fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression and freedom of association. This trend has been evident also online, as Governments around the world deployed sophisticated and multilayered techniques to filter or block online content, whether in China, Iran or elsewhere. Many Governments have imposed generic bans on entire platforms or websites, rather than targeting specific unlawful content. Post-Arab Spring, other states are more likely to ensure they are ready to effectively shut down the internet, as former President Mubarak did, should they wish. It will indeed be sadly ironic if the Arab Spring movement were to have encouraged authoritarian

Governments elsewhere to increase their control over the internet, lest the same fate befall them.

Even close to home, the riots in the UK during the past summer led to misguided calls for social networking sites or those who use them to be controlled. Those who speak in favour of restricting access to the internet or to specific platforms miss the point – this is akin to opening private post, or bugging telephones, and is not acceptable in democratic societies, save in the most exceptional circumstances.

Since the advent of the internet, the Irish Government has taken the view that, as a means of exercise of the right to freedom of expression, communication on the internet falls clearly within the scope of the right to freedom of expression, just as much as a conversation on the telephone or a private chat in a cafe. We believe that there should be as little restriction as possible to the flow of information on the internet. And of course any such restriction must come within the limited exceptions permitted under international law in order to protect the rights or reputations of others, or to protect national security or the public interest. In all such cases, international law prescribes that the restrictions must be clearly provided for in law, must pursue a lawful purpose and must respect the principles of necessity and proportionality.

In the face of these trends towards restriction and greater control, what practical measures can we take to ensure that the internet can continue to be a catalyst for democratisation?

- First, there is a need to achieve reform of laws which overstep international human rights standards. In particular, the international community should state clearly that, except in accordance with the limited exceptions permitted under international law, it is unacceptable to restrict freedom of expression online by blocking or filtering content, whether by preventing access to specific websites, or excluding certain pages containing keywords or other specific content. It is equally wrong to prevent users from accessing or disseminating information at key political moments, such as during elections or at times of social unrest, as happened in Egypt earlier this year.
- Second, there is a need to ensure that an appropriate balance is struck between the basic right to freedom of expression and curbs on this right which are necessary in certain well-defined circumstances. Ireland, for example, decriminalised defamation in 2009 as part of a comprehensive reform of the relevant legislation. And, as part of a review of the Constitution provided for in the Programme for Government, the

Government would hope to propose the removal of the Constitutional provision on blasphemy, so as to bring Irish law on this issue in line with most other European states.

- Third, we must strive for international agreement on key issues such as the right to privacy, the proposed right to be forgotten, and data protection issues in general, particularly as more and more data moves to “the cloud”. How also can we reconcile the obvious benefits of anonymity with the need for accountability and veracity? The notorious case of a Syrian woman blogger who turned out to be an American man in Scotland illustrated this point well. Specific issues also arise in relation to children’s security and privacy, which should be tackled through the criminal justice system and through international cooperation. Other areas ripe for greater international cooperation include cyber-security, intellectual property rights as they apply online, and intermediary liability.
- Fourth, we must improve access to the internet. It is not sufficient to ensure that the internet remains free and open, if billions of people around the world do not have access. While it can be argued that the so-called “digital divide” has shrunk somewhat due to the growth of access via mobile phones, greater efforts are required, in particular among poor, rural and elderly populations. In 2010, there were almost 72 internet users per 100 inhabitants in developed States, but only approximately 21 users per 100 in developing States. Target 8f of the Millennium Development Goals calls upon States “in consultation with the private sector, [to] make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications”. We should perhaps look towards Finland, which last year became the first country in the world to make broadband internet access a legal right for all citizens.
- Fifth, we should encourage voluntary measures to improve the quality of public discourse, establishing minimum standards on ethics, accuracy, personal rights, and discriminatory language. This can be done, for example, through voluntary codes of conduct for journalism, as we already have in Ireland for print media, for example, since the establishment of the Press Council and the Office of the Press Ombudsman. Quality journalism can act as an additional safeguard of media freedom, by helping to convince the public that the free media are responsible and can be held accountable where they breach their own code of conduct.. Obviously, it is not

remotely feasible to expect that every blogger or citizen journalist would apply such codes of conduct, but the mass media can greatly influence the general tone of discourse.

- Finally, civic education on use of the internet and new media should become part of our toolbox. We should continue to teach our children and other citizens the importance of distinguishing between fact and assertion, between news and opinion.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In January 2012, Ireland will assume for the very first time the Chairmanship-in-Office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, an organisation that spans almost the entire northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok. Based in Vienna, with a membership of 56 participating States, the OSCE is the largest regional security organisation in the world. It takes a comprehensive approach to security, in which human rights and democratisation play a significant part.

For our Chairmanship, it is my intention to prioritise the issue of internet freedom, in particular as it applies to new digital media. As in other parts of the world, the threat to freedom of expression online is ever-present in the OSCE region, and appears to be growing. Ireland will work to highlight the simple fact that human rights and fundamental freedoms do not change with new technologies, but extend into the digital age. We will work to ensure that existing OSCE commitments in relation to freedom of expression and freedom of the media apply to all forms and means of their exercise.

As part of these efforts, it is my intention to organise a conference in Dublin next June for OSCE participating States, at which we will aim to move towards a common understanding of the myriad issues raised by new media. We will also seek to showcase Ireland as the Internet Capital of Europe, taking advantage of the presence here of so many industry leaders in internet and new media technologies.

In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The picture that is emerging is a nuanced one. New media present clear and transformational benefits and opportunities but also important challenges, for Governments and legislators, for

media professionals and for consumers. This conference will provide an important opportunity for an in-depth consideration of these twin facets of new media in democratisation.

There is no “one-size-fits-all” template for new media use in a pro-democracy movement. Supporters of democratic freedoms are challenged to use new media in savvy and nimble ways. The political context, as well as the new media technology itself, is constantly developing. Already, the activists in Egypt and Tunisia are now grappling with new challenges, such as how to harness these tools in government and how to keep up the pressure for change during what could be a lengthy transition period. And one thing that we can be sure of is that those who oppose democratic freedoms are also drawing their own conclusions from the events of the Arab Spring.

Let us work together, therefore, to protect the internet’s universality, integrity and openness, while addressing legitimate concerns. In that way, the full potential of new media can continue to be exploited in the interest of greater democratisation, as we await the next great technological innovation, which cannot be too far away.

Thank you for your attention.