
SWEDEN

Statement at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

Session on freedom of expression

Warsaw, Monday 26 September 2011

We are meeting here at a time when technological advances have enlarged the possibilities for citizens, all over the world, to express themselves, to communicate with each other, and to seek information, on an unprecedented scale.

The latest figures say two billion internet users and well over five billion mobile phones, many of them smart enough to also browse the web.

There are 30 billion pieces of content shared on Facebook every month. And more than three billion video clips on YouTube are viewed each day by people all over the globe. Staggering figures, indeed!

This explosion of information has brought a tremendous widening of the freedom of expression, and also of people's access to information, in virtually all parts of the world.

But there is another side to this coin as well. Modern technology has given authoritarian regimes and criminal organizations better instruments to control and supervise what people are doing and saying, and also to trace and to track down and to harass people who use new media to voice their concerns.

Censorship and blocking of content on the net is frequent in countries where freedom of expression is not respected.

This presents us with a need, or even an obligation, to be much stronger in protecting human rights also in the new technologies.

The basic point of departure must be that the same human rights be valid on line as those that we have off line.

That doesn't mean that we need new human rights norms for the Internet. But it means that we must be as vigilant in protecting and defending freedom of expression on the Internet, as we are when it comes to other media.

Let me pay a tribute here to Dunja Mijatovic for her diligent and tireless work in promoting media freedom, also together with colleagues from the UN and other regional organizations.

We have seen, this past year, in northern Africa, that a people's quest for freedom and social justice can not be met by censorship or by closing down the Internet.

Yet, severe limitations of freedom of expression are still practiced in countries like China, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, we see some of this also within our own OSCE area.

I met some days ago with a number of journalists and Internet activists from Belarus. Their accounts of constant and increasing harassment of human rights activists and journalists were horrifying.

And, from another country, I want to mention in particular Bakhtiyar Hajiyev and Jabbar Savalan, two young bloggers in Azerbaijan who used Facebook and Twitter in calling for peaceful protests and who are now imprisoned.

Freedom of expression on the Internet doesn't mean that it should be entirely open to everything. Limitations to freedom of expression are certainly possible also online, for example when it comes to hate speech or incitement to violence. But we have to bear in mind that these restrictions must be clearly defined by law and meet established international human rights standards.

I wish also to underscore the importance of privacy protection. Arbitrary or unlawful interference with anyone's privacy or family as well as unlawful attacks on people's honour and reputation can undermine freedoms of expression, association and assembly. This right to privacy also applies to online communication and activities. With limited exceptions, individuals should be able to express themselves anonymously on the Internet.

The new technologies – also including satellite television, now available to a large majority of people on earth – can in many ways be seen as tools for change, even if they also can be tools for oppression. But this means just tools. Change itself is driven by ideas, by convictions about freedom and social justice and welfare, by people's values and by meeting popular demand. That role cannot be played by any technology, however advanced. But technology can help us achieve change, and therefore be great instruments in the struggle for democracy and human rights. Let us make sure that we handle this tool in a positive way, with as few restrictions as possible.