

Foreword

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The Promise of Information and Communication Societies

The year is 2006. The first World Summit on the Information Society was held in December 2003, with a follow-up in November 2005. Governments of the world have adopted the first political Constitution of Cyberspace, thereby formally acknowledging the potential benefits stemming from the use of information and communication technologies, and have agreed to help narrow the digital gap between the developed and the developing countries: a gap that is unacceptable for all humanity and that represents both a cause and a consequence of the unequal distribution of wealth in the world and within countries.

Formally recognized by all is the premise that the development of the information society must be based on the framework of human rights, and should respect and uphold the standards laid down in the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Human rights are universal, indivisible, interrelated, and interdependent, as reaffirmed at the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights. Hence, a crucial premise for realizing the vision of the information society is a commitment to effectively implement and enforce all human rights: civil and political as well as economic, social, and cultural.

Furthermore, there is a general recognition that information and communication technologies should be used to advance and implement the U.N. Millennium Development Goals, the indicators to end human poverty by 2015.

The human rights standards require governments to ensure that the information society does not result in discrimination or in deprivation of existing rights. On the contrary, information and communication

technologies should be used to advance the effective implementation of human rights at the local level. The principle of nondiscrimination mandates universal access to information and communication as an overall goal. All individuals, communities, and countries should be empowered to take part in the information society, using their own languages to create, disseminate, and share information and knowledge. Ensuring information and education for all is essential if information and communication technologies are to play a vital role in helping to reach the U.N. millennium goal of eradicating poverty, hunger, and diseases, particularly in the developing world, where nearly half of the population is living below the poverty line. But it is also important in the developed world, where the regulatory framework for information access, ownership, and privacy is being developed and debated.

The information society has communication as its nerve center. It provides new and easy access to information and to communication, to find like-minded persons, and to build bridges that cross traditional geographical and cultural borders. Information can be power; communication is empowering. As societies transform into information societies, the ability to communicate and learn becomes the most important societal skill. Seizing this opportunity requires openness and the ability to embrace and reflect on a number of different perspectives and realities. If we are willing to meet this challenge, the information society can provide an enormous learning opportunity for all of us.

And this is why I wish to stress that we are indeed entering a new global society: that of information, human communication, and shared knowledge.

The Challenge for Human Rights

At the core of human rights are the dignity, integrity, and vulnerability of the individual. Human rights are about people on the ground and their rights. The right to a decent standard of living and to a life lived in freedom, without hunger, violence, and suffering. The right to participate in society, to voice opinions, and to be free from arbitrary intrusions or restrictions by the state. As expressed by Eleanor Roosevelt, who chaired the U.N. Human Rights Commission in its first years:

Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerned citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world. (Eleanor Roosevelt at the presentation of *"In Your Hands: A Guide for Community Action for the Tenth Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,"* March 27, 1958, United Nations, New York)

Access to information is essential for self-determination, for social and political participation, and for development. However, at present only one third of the world population has access to information and communication technologies; the great majority is excluded from them. The poor remain poor and the rich remain rich. The great challenge facing the world is how to expand the reach of information to all human beings, no matter their social, economic, cultural, and geographical position. A region such as Africa has wealth and cultural diversity, but also represents a tremendous challenge in empowering illiterate people and ensuring that ordinary citizens, who speak only local languages, are included in the information society.

Human rights, democracy, and development are intertwined. Unless human rights are respected, international peace and security and the promotion of economic and social development cannot be achieved. Often the political debate leaves one with the impression that conflicts and terror require us to diminish human rights and freedoms. This rhetoric has put human rights on the defensive. It is important to insist that effective implementation of human rights is actually the best way to prevent conflict and terror, the best way to end suffering and inequality. All actions to secure international peace and security must be firmly based on the human rights framework, and respect and uphold the standards—not least in times of fear and heated public emotions.

When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948, it was one of the first major achievements of the United Nations. After more than fifty years it remains an instrument that has a significant effect on people's lives all over the world. Its adoption was the first time in

history that human rights and fundamental freedoms were formulated in such detail. At this point in history, and within an information society perspective, human rights face not only great potentials but also strong pressure—not least in regard to new technological developments. As democratic societies we need to constantly reflect on how we respond to the challenges presented by new technologies and new political developments.

Rapid advances in surveillance and security measures, especially in the post-9/11 environment, can have a chilling effect on privacy and on freedom of expression and freedom of association, and new technologies can be used to restrict access to information. The deployment of communication infrastructures, combined with central data storage, biometrics, and pervasive computing, threatens the right to privacy in new and intrusive ways. The growing commodification of information and knowledge contradicts some of the basic potentials of enhanced access to, and sharing of, information, and thus the development of a rich public domain. Information and communication technologies can be used to promote diversity and respect for cultures, but also to spread racial hatred, and hence restrict or suppress diversity. The digital divide represents an unequal access to information and to the means of communication, and therefore requires special measures to improve the situation of those who are vulnerable, exposed, or excluded. Applications need to be developed and used to advance the realization of economic, social, and cultural rights and to support human rights to education and learning, in order to build, all around the world, a real democratic culture. As Nelson Mandela said, we need to create a new political culture based on human rights. Indeed, the so-called digital divide represents a knowledge divide, a social and economic divide, that we must address with the participation of all stakeholders.

I welcome this book as an attempt to explore these many difficult questions, and I hope it will fuel ideas and knowledge on how the agenda of information, human communication, and shared knowledge societies can be used to advance the protection of human rights.