

A LETTER
FROM UNESCO

BUILDING A WORLD OF PRESS FREEDOM

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UNESCO, as the only UN agency with a particular mandate to defend the free flow of information, has been actively engaged in efforts to improve press freedom and its corollary, freedom of expression. Freedom of the press is, after all, an application of the individual human rights principle of freedom of expression. Press freedom and freedom of expression are guiding principles of UNESCO that apply to traditional as well as new media. UNESCO recognizes that press freedom is central to building strong democracies, contributing to good governance, promoting civic participation and the rule of law, and encouraging human development and security. As such, UNESCO is committed to mobilizing efforts to promote freedom of expression and press freedom as a basic right indispensable to the exercise of democratic citizenship.

The UNESCO Constitution states a commitment to fostering “the free exchange of ideas and knowledge” and “the free flow of ideas by word and image.” Of course, Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers.” The Declaration of Sofia, endorsed by the UNESCO General Conference in 1997, states “The access to and the use of these new media should be afforded the same freedom of expression protections as traditional media.” Most recently, I refer to the 4th principle of the Declaration of Principles issued by the

Geneva session of the World Summits on the Information Society in December 2003, which provides a clear confirmation that new forms of communication should be afforded the same freedom of expression rights as traditional news media.

The challenge is how to turn these principled commitments into practical reality. At the heart of this issue is universality – of creating inclusive knowledge societies in which all have the opportunity to participate “regardless of frontiers.” Indeed, as the 4th principle of the Geneva Declaration states, “Communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organization. It is central to the Information Society. Everyone, everywhere, should have the opportunity to participate and no one should be excluded from the benefits the Information Society offers.” In drawing attention to these basic principles, I am under no illusion that the complex, ‘real world’ problems that we face are thereby solved. It is an unfortunate truth that, in many countries, there is a long road ahead of us in securing press freedom and there are still millions of citizens who have no access at all to new media. But these principles do provide a standard by which we may measure our actions and those of others. The fuller application and implementation of these principles through concrete action is something we should all be working towards.

The present special issue of the **Brazilian Journalism Research** brings material for thought on the concrete process of building a world of press freedom.

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