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Distinguished participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to participate in this 2nd IFLA Presidential Meeting and to address you on behalf of UNESCO.

UNESCO strongly supports this event whose theme -- "Free access and digital divide – challenges for science and society in the digital age" -- is at the heart of our mandate, as well as yours.

Over the past decade, Information and Communication Technologies (often referred to as ICTs) have triggered a revolution, affecting education, culture, and sciences as well as many other spheres of our lives. The influence of ICTs on our world is dramatic when you realize that we refer to a vast range of technologies, from traditional television and radio to computer operating systems and the Internet to electronic devices including cellular telephones.

Access to relevant and valuable information, facilitated by ICTs, increasingly determines patterns of learning, cultural expression, wealth creation and social participation. With their potential to facilitate access to knowledge, these new technologies and innovative applications are catalysts for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, as they also provide opportunities for development, more effective poverty reduction and building the basis of peace.

Nonetheless, whenever I think about the Information Society revolution, I also recall the words of one of the main revolutionary theorists of the past century. In his "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement"¹, Mao Tse-tung wrote: "Revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another".

ICTs have undeniably played a key role in our current information revolution and globalization, if not in reducing poverty and fostering development, certainly in making inequalities widely acknowledged across the globe. Yet, given Mao's very precise definition, I wonder if we are experiencing the first peaceful revolution in human existence, or if the ICT revolution is only a rhetorical, but appealing, definition of the tremendous advances of technology: a mock revolution that will not change the inequalities and disparities of our societies, but just add the adjective *digital* to the existing divides.

UNESCO has a mandate to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image and to maintain, increase and spread knowledge to contribute to peace and security. In this context, throughout the five- year process of the World Summit on Information Society, the Organization has been continuously promoting the concept of building Knowledge Societies based on four key principles, namely: freedom of expression; universal access to information and knowledge; respect for cultural and linguistic diversity; and quality education for all.

UNESCO's position has been that, as both a description of present trends and as a characterization of a desirable future, the notion of a single global information society does not capture the full potential of the information and communication revolution for human development. By contrast, the concept of "knowledge societies" stresses plurality and inclusiveness, and puts the emphasis on what technology can do to improve people's lives rather than on technology itself. This broader vision maintains that the application of new

¹ Mao Zedong [*Mao Tse-tung*]: Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan, March 1927, in Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung, vol. I (3rd printing; Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1975), pp. 23-29

technologies offers remarkable possibilities for advancing human development.

Building knowledge societies therefore opens the way to *humanizing* the process of globalization. It requires an empowering societal vision which encompasses solidarity and participation. If knowledge societies are to be effective tools for inclusive human development and positive social change, the role of access to knowledge and the guarantee of free and universal access to qualified knowledge must be at their core. It is at the same time critical that new knowledge is created on the basis of and through a rich public domain derived from peoples and communities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Support of and deep respect for library services have always been part of UNESCO's action. However, with the unprecedented technological developments of the past decade, you know well that the role of libraries and librarians has changed dramatically worldwide, and the concept of libraries today goes far beyond the physical boundaries.

This change is reflected in UNESCO's activities for the development and promotion of digital libraries – including the World Digital Library - and for capacity-building programmes for librarians. In these efforts, the focus is rightfully placed not just on connectivity and technology, but on affecting the ability of people to generate, preserve, disseminate and apply knowledge in all aspects of their lives – for life-long learning and economic development.

Libraries, like schools, play a fundamental role in building Knowledge Societies. But the challenge is so great that it cannot be met simply by extending existing methods and practices. We need innovative approaches to access and share knowledge, and this is helped greatly through the development of information and communication technology. At the same time, we cannot rely solely on new technological approaches; we have to promote values for human development.

The role of libraries in building knowledge societies represents a challenge to promote an ethic to access; an ethic based on social responsibility and commitment to provide universal and impartial access, to valued and reliable information. Libraries have risen to this challenge time and again, as reflected in IFLA's various Manifestos, on

schools, on public libraries, on the Internet, on the Information Society.

This year is the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a fundamental pillar of international peace and cooperation. Article 19 of the Declaration 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 and regardless of frontiers".

The first phrase of the article on freedom of expression tends to obscure the *functional* part. The ability to "Seek, receive and impart information" means to be able to access, process and produce information and knowledge freely. This pillar corresponds precisely to the historical role of libraries.

In the Information era, some posit that the role of libraries has been overcome by the tremendous spread of search engines that accompanied the development of the Internet. The potential global reach and low cost of accessing information from "*googling*" seems to some to undermine the very essence of libraries *as gateways to knowledge*.

This would be a monumental error. Aside from the fact that librarians are needed more than ever to help us negotiate the thickets of information that bewilder us daily, access does not stand alone. What makes access valuable is the platform of ethical preconditions on which it stands.

Libraries base access to knowledge on the idea that "Freedom, prosperity and the development of society and of individuals are fundamental human values", as declared in the IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto. From that perspective it is clear that libraries have assumed, and practice, a *social responsibility* in shaping well-informed citizens capable of exercising their democratic rights and playing an active role in society.

That manifesto, and others that IFLA has issued, recognizes the role of education and free and unlimited access to knowledge, thought, culture and information as essential for constructive participation and the development of democracy -- in other words, ensuring sustainable human development. Does Internet-based search engine access to

knowledge stand on the same values? Does it endorse social responsibility? Even where such values are shared in principle, can we leave the access to knowledge to the rule of a market responsibility?

There is one clear aspect where social responsibility to provide equitable access to knowledge is becoming crucial: the possibility to access and use knowledge in cyberspace in our own languages.

Language is the primary vector for communicating knowledge and traditions. The opportunity to use one's language on global information networks such as the Internet will determine the extent to which one can participate in the emerging knowledge society.

Yet thousands of languages worldwide are absent from Internet content and there are no tools for creating or translating information into these excluded tongues. Huge sections of the world's population are thus prevented from enjoying the benefits of technological advances and obtaining information essential to their wellbeing and development. Unchecked, this situation will contribute to a loss of cultural diversity on information networks and a widening of existing socio-economic inequalities. Such barriers seem to deepen the knowledge divide more than the lack of infrastructure or any other factors.

This dilemma harkens back to another century when, with the rapid expansion of the telegraph, newspapers and the railroad, the United States in 1845 was moving into a new communication and information age. One skeptic was Henry David Thoreau, famous then and now for his effort to live in a simple style. As for the new inventions touted as miracles, Thoreau observed:

Men have an indistinct notion that if they keep up this activity of joint stocks and spades long enough all will at length ride somewhere, in next to no time, and for nothing; but though a crowd rushes to the depot, and the conductor shouts "All aboard!" when the smoke is blown away and the vapor condensed, it will be perceived that a few are riding but the rest are run over.²

² Thoreau Henry David: *Walden and Civil Disobedience* 1854. Barnes & Noble Classics ed. 2003, p 45.

Fortunately, UNESCO and IFLA both are historically committed to promoting multilingualism as a means of eliminating barriers to knowledge and information. Indeed, IFLA's Multicultural Library Manifesto quotes UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity as the context for underscoring that to cherish and preserve cultural and linguistic diversity, libraries should, *inter alia*, "provide information in appropriate languages and scripts." How can we make this goal a reality?

During the last internet Governance Forum in November 2007 in Rio de Janeiro, UNESCO fully endorsed and committed itself to the development of a set of universal standards aimed at facilitating the creation of multilingual knowledge repositories and enhancing access to such knowledge. In the spirit of the WSIS process, the Organization upholds open and inclusive *multi-stakeholder partnerships* based on trust and a shared vision to promote the values of knowledge societies, to work on multilingualism and preserve culturally diverse heritage.

Librarians have an important and unique role to play in this action. You have always endorsed the sense of socially valuable access to information and knowledge. Your profession is to know how to consolidate, and add value to, information. You serve the public by finding, evaluating, selecting, organizing, describing, and creating quality information resources. You possess the ability to *transform the digital divide into digital opportunity*.

Let me conclude by assuring you that UNESCO maintains its commitment - in cooperation with IFLA - to take advantage of the opportunities arising from the rapid evolution of the *information era*. Together we will continue to support actions to promote socially valuable access to information, thus making the knowledge revolution the first peaceful revolution of the twenty-first century.