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Address by the Chairperson-in-Office, Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Eamon Gilmore T.D., at the opening of the Dublin Conference on Internet Freedom

Dublin Castle, 18 June 2012

Excellencies, Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to welcome you to the historic setting of Dublin Castle for this Dublin Conference on Internet Freedom. I am pleased to see so many participants from OSCE participating States, from OSCE Institutions, partner States, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, and further afield.

The internet is arguably the most transformative technological innovation of the 20th century, and has already defined the 21st. In the 19th century, railways and the steam engine opened up a new era of mass communication, commerce and even warfare. In little more than 20 years, the internet has connected not just cities, but continents; not just powerful capitals, but individual citizens across the globe. It has changed the dynamic of power, both within and beyond borders. It has changed how we do business; how we do politics; and how we engage with society.

Some things, however, do not change. They are the values upheld by this organisation: 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 medium may change – the medium may even pose its own challenges – but the message remains the same.

Over the next two days, you will hear from Government speakers, human rights experts, NGOs, journalists and bloggers, as well as from representatives of the ICT sector, the legal profession and more besides. They all share an interest in the Internet, human rights and the rule of law, though their perspectives may differ.

In bringing together this diverse group of panellists, our hope is to inform, to stimulate discussion, and, ultimately, to guide OSCE participating States and other key stake-holders to make informed choices. None of us claims to have all the answers. We don't even know if we're asking all the right questions. Let us work together, therefore, during these two days to

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find ways to protect the internet's universality, integrity and openness, while addressing legitimate concerns.

Freedom of expression is a basic building block of an open and free society. It is necessary for the empowerment of citizens, and we have a public duty – State, civil society and the international community – to work for its protection. The Internet and other networked technologies have provided people all over the world with a new platform for exercising their right to freedom of opinion and expression. It has become an indispensable tool for all citizens to seek, receive and impart information. We, in Government, have an obligation to enable our citizens to access the Internet unhindered. Yet some governments are increasingly resorting to a variety of measures to restrict such freedoms, contrary to OSCE Commitments and to international human rights law.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights states as follows:

“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.”

While adopted as far back as 1948, the text of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights has stood the test of time. In protecting freedom of opinion and expression, it clearly covers expression on the Internet as much as a conversation in the street or a chat on the telephone. The exercise of the right to freedom of expression may be subject only to very limited exceptions permitted under international law. And we must acknowledge that the right to freedom of expression can, on occasion, include views that offend, shock or disturb, although there are, of course, limits.

Working Session 1 of the Conference will explore many of these issues related to freedom of expression, exploring specific challenges such as the use by some Governments of increasingly sophisticated and multilayered techniques to filter or block online content; the disputed concept of intermediary liability (also known as where the buck stops!); and the intersection between freedom of expression and intellectual property rights. These are key determinants of the future shape of the Internet.

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But the internet is more than a medium, or a platform for freedom of expression. Increasingly, it is also an actor in political and social change, and the realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Last year, the world witnessed a master class — predominantly taught by Arab youth — in how to use the Internet to spread information about political dissent, to galvanise support and to create momentum to drive democratisation forward.

The Internet helped to mobilise the people to call for justice, equality, accountability and better respect for human rights.

The Internet provided agile yet robust networks for pro-democracy workers to organise political action in societies where such outlets are limited.

And as the movements in Tunisia and elsewhere grew, the Internet helped the protest movements to plan next steps at each juncture in their unprecedented, fast-moving and unexpected revolts.

But most of all, it demonstrated that, the human desire for dignity – the freedom to determine one's own destiny – is most powerful when that one individual voice finds another, and another, until it becomes a chorus that cannot be ignored, or suppressed.

Of course, the Internet has radically changed how citizens all over the world relate to the State. We live in an age of unprecedented access to information online, which increases transparency, accountability and participation in policy making. Unfortunately, it also brings with it the possibility of increased surveillance and repression by authoritarian regimes, taking advantage of the openness which characterises the Internet, and which is its greatest asset.

Working Session Two will examine the uses of the Internet to facilitate and enhance the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as potential uses of the Internet and Internet-based surveillance technology to limit, hinder, control, monitor and/or manipulate the exercise of these rights. What measures can be taken by Internet users, including bloggers and human rights activists, to protect themselves from illicit monitoring and repression?

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Recognising the different motivations which inspire governments, web users, private companies and other stake-holders, Working Session 2 will also consider the value of corporate social responsibility initiatives, and how they might best help to ensure Internet freedom. It will also examine some of the specific threats to, and attacks on, the Internet, including the threat from malware, hackers, and other forms of cyber-warfare.

Moving from who is controlling the conversation, Working Session 3 looks at who is having the conversation.

The human desire to communicate with one another is irrepressible. In Ireland, some may say we've turned it into an art form. From the printing press, to the telegraph, to the telephone, to television, the singular purpose of technological innovation in communications has been to widen access to ideas and knowledge, not to contain it.

While we can trace a clear arc between the desire to communicate with one's neighbour, and the emergence of mass media, 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.

Yet, what we are now witnessing is the evolution of a new type of media, which blurs the distinction between interpersonal and mass communication, and between public and private communication. The advent of interactive "new media" represents a radical, even bewildering, shift in terms of who is in control of information. Social media and social networks make it easier than ever before to share information, receive news, and comment on ideas. Websites and networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LiveJournal are changing the way news and information is generated and accessed. They serve traditional media as tools for journalists to create content, as tools for distributing information and as tools for accessing new information. Bloggers have expanded the scope of journalism and added new forms of 'citizen journalism' to the media landscape, as best demonstrated in North Africa and the Middle East in the past 18 months.

The final session of the Conference will explore the phenomenon of these new media, examining the new possibilities offered by social media and social networks, as well as some of the well-documented challenges, including privacy and data protection.

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Last Saturday was the 16th of June, also known as Bloomsday to fans and scholars of James Joyce, one of the most important authors of modernist literature of the 20th Century. His most famous work, *Ulysses*, was set in Dublin on 16 June 1904, chronicling a day in the life of Leopold Bloom. Following its publication in 1922, *Ulysses* was declared obscene and banned in the United Kingdom, the United States and elsewhere, though never – contrary to popular belief – in Ireland. During his life, Joyce championed freedom of expression and fought against all forms of censorship. If he were alive today, I have no doubt that Joyce would be a strong supporter of Internet Freedom.

This is my cue to hand over to the high-level panellists, who will share with you their insights and opinions on key developments and trends, including important work underway by Governments and key regional and international organisations. I am very pleased to invite Ms Rebecca MacKinnon to assume the role of moderator of this session. Rebecca is a Senior Fellow with the New America Foundation and co-founder of Global Voices Online. She will also be known to many of you from her time at CNN, where she was bureau chief in Beijing and Tokyo. Rebecca is eminently qualified to steer you through the coming session, having recently authored a book entitled “Consent of the Networked: The Worldwide Struggle for Internet Freedom”.

I look forward to hearing the debate and wish you every success in your important discussions today. Thank you.