

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

**Speech by Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland
“Freedom of Expression and Democracy in the Digital Age - Opportunities,
Rights, Responsibilities”**

**Council of Europe Conference of Ministers
responsible for Media and Information Society**

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President Nikolić, Dear Ministers, Distinguished guests,

I am very pleased to be back in Belgrade and to address you today.

This ballroom is named after Ivo Andrić – a great modern writer, Nobel Prize winner, a long-time diplomat and a true European.

I would like to start my address with his words:

*“Of everything that man builds, nothing is more valuable than bridges...
They are built where human needs cross.”*

That is why we are here today: to build bridges between the present and the future.

My first point is that the digital age offers us countless opportunities.

Access to information and modes of communication create new ways to participate.

New opportunities to hold powers to account.
New opportunities to direct the course of one's life.

Never before have so many people from so many places had so much power at their fingertips.

Widespread connectivity has transformed people's expectations of their governments.

Think of the Twitter Revolution in Moldova in 2009. It led to the dissolution of Parliament and prompted new elections with the Communist Party becoming the main opposition party.

Think of Egypt and Tunisia, where masses of young people, armed with little more than mobile phones, helped fuel revolutions.

Think of Mahmoud Salem, the Egyptian blogger-turned-activist who became a spokesman for his country's 2011 revolution.

Their use of communication technology helped them challenge years of authority and control, hastening a process that used to take decades.

Increasingly, anyone with a mobile phone and access to the internet can advocate for government accountability and transparency.

Connectivity offers new possibilities for journalists as well, especially in countries where the press is not free.

Corrupt officials are able to operate more easily without fear of prosecution because they control information, often through bribery and brutality.

Connectivity can help change this balance of power.

We must seize this moment.

We must learn to adapt so we can take full advantage of these exciting advancements.

As global connectivity increases, many institutions and hierarchies will have to adjust or risk becoming obsolete.

This affects us all. The Council of Europe is no exception. This is why this Conference is so important.

During these two days, you will discuss how to preserve the essential role of media and freedom of expression in the digital age.

My second point is that we must continue to defend fundamental freedoms in the digital age as well.

Without freedom of expression and the media, there is no genuine democracy. Internet has not changed this.

The survival of a democratic society depends on this freedom.

The Council of Europe set standards for freedom of expression and democracy in the digital age.

Yet implementation still lags behind.

I am concerned in particular about the safety of journalists and bloggers, one of the main topics of our conference.

The brutal assassination of two French journalists just a few days ago in Mali is a tragic reminder of the risks of this profession but also within the borders of our continent, journalists and bloggers experience intimidation and harassment. Some have been arrested or assaulted because of their work or their personal opinion.

Intimidation and violence against them lead to self-censorship.

Journalists realise that they will put themselves in danger by covering certain topics. We often see impunity for the offenders.

We must remedy this – and urgently.

Standard setting is an important pillar. But if we don't follow it up with monitoring and implementation, any hope for a solid foundation will be lost.

What is also becoming more and more important, in the digital age, is that we must continue to defend the right to privacy and data protection.

I have watched with concern the recent reports of mass surveillance by national security agencies.

Concerns about national security and criminal activity may justify narrowly targeted surveillance.

But surveillance without safeguards to protect privacy hampers human rights.

As the European Court of Human Rights stated in 2006, “a system of secret surveillance for the protection of national security may undermine or even destroy democracy under the cloak of defending it.”

We need to ask ourselves some important questions, such as:

How do we balance privacy and security, but also freedom to impart the necessary information which is an integral element of the freedom of expression?

Are all our long-standing values, standards and attitudes relevant and applicable in the cyberspace? Do we have to give some of these up to be part of the new digital age?

My categorical answer to this is “no”, but that still leaves us with a difficult task of preventing this from happening again. This is a task also for this Conference.

Dear friends,

My third point is that, as Eric Schmidt, the Executive Chairman of Google put it, we must be aware of the “dark side of the digital revolution”.

Technology does not just help individuals pushing for democratic reform. It can also help dictators suppress dissent, or help extremists broadcast hate.

We must work to stamp out hate speech. The arrival of the digital age has made this priority even more pertinent.

Individuals should have the universal right to share their views freely.

As I have said before: it makes no difference whether one exercises this right on a podium, in a public square or on a Facebook profile.

However, freedom of expression must have some limits.

Hate speech threatens the peace and sustainability of society.

This city, this country, knows this all too well. The Balkans have experienced their share of hate.

The protection of freedom of expression and the battle against hate speech are part of the same fight.

We can only defeat hate speech with concerted national and transnational action.

Last week, I met the leader of the French Jewish Students Union who succeeded in getting Twitter to stop the spreading of anti-Semitic hate speech. After initial resistance, Twitter co-operated with the French prosecutors to identify the perpetrators and set up an early warning system to prevent the further dissemination of hate speech online. We have invited the Student Union leader to our World Forum for Democracy later this month to share this success story with an international audience.

Dear friends,

The future will be shaped by the way citizens, politicians and institutions handle their new responsibilities in the digital age.

For all the possibilities that communication technologies represent, their use for good or evil depends on credible, visionary leaders and aware citizens.

It will depend on all of us.

There will never be a substitute for freedom of expression.

Together we must discern what truly matters and build lasting bridges to help get from the present to the future.

Thank you.