

It is a regret to me that I was not able to be with you in person for this important conference. While tensions are so high in my part of the world I do not feel that I can in all conscience leave my homeland.

The news has certainly not been good. On this occasion I would ask you to recall the journalists and photographers who have lost their lives in Iraq in the pursuit of their duty.

If we are to talk about a 'single information space for Eurasia and its peoples', I should like to contribute by suggesting that we keep in mind some basic agreements. I believe in the idea of the media - press, broadcast and Internet - as a public service, which must maintain credibility in order to engage properly with its public.

Today, all forms of media have expanded their geographical reach and sales. At the same time, most consumers of information have become informationally more sophisticated and suspicious. We see more people regarding the media as light entertainment at best - or else the mouthpieces of one or another vested interest.

Paradoxically, the media itself has fed this suspicion, in two ways.

Firstly, over the past thirty or forty years, media sources - especially in the developed world - have become increasingly independent from and critical of political party lines, simultaneously with a rise in independent journalism and freedom of access to official information. A substantial difference between media and government sources leads one to suspect that one or the other is misleading - but which? Hence, a more critical approach from information consumers.

Secondly, the huge and expanding library of media outlets makes it possible for people to compare a broad variety of media resources. This is especially true in areas where media broadcasts can cross national borders, but the Internet along with cable and satellite television also contribute. Governments which retain tight control over media are thereby suspected of insecurity and something to hide, leading people to seek alternative sources more energetically.

I would like to offer a corollary. Media, which seem to serve known or suspected political interests are increasingly distrusted on principle. Polarised positions emerge according to which people automatically dismiss information from certain sources. What seems like fair analysis or human interest in one place may be immediately understood somewhere else as cynical manipulation or emotional bludgeoning. When the 'man on the street' instantly discovers a hidden, propagandistic meaning in any information that he receives from a source he suspects, that is when media, educationally, have lost.

This is equally true for religious spokespeople. As soon as clerics become politicised, we lose the possibility of finding common ground. It is more than ever time to elevate religious principles and humanistic principles, which agree upon the dignity of man to a high place in our thinking, and to publicise those universal principles as such.

A Knight Ridder poll in the United States some months ago showed that the majority of Americans believe that Iraqis were among the hijackers of the planes on September 11, 2001. In fact, as you all know, there were no Iraqis on the planes. Since then, this fact has been cited as evidence that the American media failed to inform or even misled the American public.

The recent tightly-framed footage of Saddam's statue being toppled in Baghdad has been shown again and again as the image of liberated Iraqis responding en masse by destroying a symbol of tyranny. Other wider-framed photographs purport to show that the whole event involved no more than perhaps a couple of hundred people in the square under military supervision. The original footage has thus been dismissed

by many critics of the US as propaganda for a successful war outcome.

Mr Donald Rumsfeld himself criticised media for repeatedly showing the same image of a vase being stolen in Baghdad, by asking "Is it possible that there were that many vases in the whole country?" This comment in turn was seen by some to prove that the cultural importance of Mesopotamia was very much a secondary consideration in the war effort.

The camera does not present a 360-degree view, of course; it imitates the human gaze and pretends to offer us direct experience without allowing us to look over our shoulder. The camera cannot simultaneously show the toppling statues and, behind the square in the streets, the human bodies already toppled among the ruins. I think it is time to consider how the media can escape from the accusation of making politically-determined choices in what they present, and to seek more broadly-accepted definitions of objectivity in reporting.

I suggest that Eurasian media space, if it wants to retain credibility, must be about education and not about cosseting exclusionist attitudes. If we wish to depolarise debate and extend media reach, we need consumers who can reach their own conclusions. In other words, the only viable future is to abandon politicised, unrepresentative media everywhere. We need participatory media to talk to people and with people, and not only at people. If you wish to talk about security, I think it has become very clear that we should stop talking about hard security in terms of police action and military action and a strictly controlled media, and talk about soft security - addressing hearts and minds, and granting people the dignity of free speech, free action and free choice. To be credible, any democratic outfit has to show that it can freely accommodate views that are out of line with the political mainstream.

Today, many people feel empty. The opposite of happiness is emptiness; and that is the greatest danger that we face. There is a difference between asking people to die for you who can engage in so-called 'Nintendo wars' of safely dropping bombs from 30,000 feet - and people who are prepared to die simply because they don't see any hope in living. And today the Hamas and the Jihadi organisations have thousands of volunteers. Japan ran out of aeroplanes before it ran out of kamikaze pilots. Where are the balanced and centrist media voices? We do not need any more emotion in my part of the world, but we do desperately need representative voices.

I believe that freedom of expression is just that. I think this has to be made very clear. If you have public fora for public policy analysis in Bangladesh, for example, surely you can have it within the Arab world - which today suffers badly from an image of repressed speech, censorship, intelligence surveillance and tight control of the press and media.

It is not my belief that freedom means that people can be expected to do bad things. The purpose of public order is to encourage civil society and self-determination, not to quash it. We see now, in Iraq, US efforts to build civil society through an interpreter: is this not strange? The lack of trust is so overwhelming that we cannot easily conceive of a US official asking native speakers of Arabic to address native speakers of Arabic on the topic of Iraq's future. Is the medium the message? If the medium is American English, how could the message be interpreted? What is the message of a holy site, and what is the message when that holy site is occupied by alien soldiers? I expect political leaders to recognise and uphold the moral authority of the holy places, not to turn them to self-aggrandising material purposes.

We should not, of course, be hypocritical. On the one side, we say to the Americans: "You're not addressing hearts and minds," but are we managing hearts and minds in the Arab world - by responding to people's legitimate fears?

The public all over the world is very diverse and becoming more so. We must, therefore, consider how personal experience shapes interpretations. We must think in terms of common and shared values. We

must emphasise the media's obligation to provide a sense of participation, representation, understanding and fairness.

In Jordan, Article 150 of the Jordanian Penal Code was amended after 11th September. The new article loosely defined media offences as any publication of material, which might lead to criminal activity, significant personal offence, or breaches of public order. Clearly, media encouraging crime, hatred, racism, slander or libel, rumour or riot would be highly undesirable. Freedom to report carries with it the obligation to report responsibly and impartially. But post-9/11, it seems that the world is black and white - without shades of grey.

At the moment, an Orwellian government control of information might seem inescapable. The majority are vastly disadvantaged and pitted against global organisations. The Club of Rome, over which I have the honour to preside, notes that the WTO is resented in Africa, Latin America and other developing areas because trade barriers are going up in the industrialised countries. Two-thirds of the world's population do not have access to a telephone. Almost 92% do not have access to the Internet. Televisions are not the norm when most of the globe is not connected to electricity supply.

But the amendment to Article 150 in the Jordanian Code has just this week been repealed, to promote a freer press. The information industry worldwide is growing very fast, becoming more affordable, and reaching out to new markets all the time. In a decade, many millions more people will be informing their views - whether moderate, extremist, prejudiced or undecided - from media sources. Information and unintended subtexts will continue to travel further and faster than people. What values will people deduce about other places in the world from what they see and read? What or who will contextualise those values for them?

In the Toronto Star not long ago, a member of the group 'Physicians for Survival' in Canada wrote that Canadians are anxious about political, economic and cultural intimidation by the US and the loss of Canadian identity. If this is the case with one of the closest cultures to the US, then what hope is there of promoting American humanist values further afield? If foreign policy appears to be about promoting petrodollars rather than petro-euros, will the US not still need access to friendly markets?

With regard to the media's involvement in the strategic role of Eurasia in world affairs, therefore, the only credible and long-lasting role for the media is one of very strong - one might almost say aggressive - centrist pluralism. It should not be a question of responsibility versus sales. It is a question of making sure that the Eurasian informational sphere enjoys flexibility, variety and stability within and between pluralist cultures - not brittle political party lines. If this can be achieved, then Eurasian media and media values will also become increasingly desired by many people in other parts of the world.

I hope that some of these thoughts may have provided points of conversation. It has always been my aim to promote friendly dialogue within a civilised framework for disagreement. The Arab Thought Forum represents my wish to host intellectuals while the World Conference of Religions for Peace represents my wish to host religious figures. Recently, I have also undertaken a project with John Marks of 'Search for Common Ground' entitled Partners in Humanity. It is a media and educational project intended to provide fair and impartial information and to improve media relations between the Arab world and the United States in particular. I pray that many more such projects may arise in order to promote the conversation between citizens and societies, which we so much need if we are all to survive into a better future for everyone.