

Statement by Tómas Ingi Olrich, Minister of Education,
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Mr. Chairman, your excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen. On behalf of the government of Iceland, I would like to thank the International Telecommunication Union, the United Nations and the Swiss government for their major contributions in preparing this summit.

Mankind has experienced two major changes in cultural evolution both related to information collection and communication. At one time man dealt with his environment through all kinds of artistic performance, music, pictorial creations and linguistic arts. These were the oral times when knowledge and values were transmitted from one generation to another through art. It left us linguistic tools of amazing complexity, sophistication and refinement. All of these tools illustrate a perfection built on time consuming maturity and performance.

With the introduction of writing, an era of the recorded universe was opened in which we are still living. It brought us a strange mixture of quantity and quality, extended from the highest performances of literature to the most complicated bureaucracy. Strangely enough, during this shorter period of time, languages have had a tendency to lose their more complicated refinements and sophisticated tools for the benefit of simplification and speed.

We are now perhaps on the threshold of a revolution, the electronic information revolution. It is characterized by an enormous potential of data quantity, available to the grand public, who has a decreasing time to inhale, not to mention digestion. This information flood is not limited by geography. Globalization makes the world smaller than it deserves, and distances trivial. The lack of time of modern man and the easy access to unlimited information illustrate the challenge of the information society: How do we preserve quality in the kingdom of quantity? How can man, diminished by the lack of time, preserve quality that was bred through time and by time?

In the field of culture we face the same problems as in the environment. There is need for a sustainable policy to promote cultural quality and diversity. Cultural diversity cannot be protected. It can only be promoted and cultivated. And we should use the technology and the general access to information to spread values and diversity. It is necessary to have one foot in the information and communication society and the other well established in traditional values. The nations of the world should strengthen the position of their cultural identity and work hard at making it available to the rest of the world on the Internet.

If technology is put to best advantage it can support cultural diversity instead of weakening it. Technology can be used to increase efficiency, lower costs and improve results in many areas with which the international community is struggling, not least in the field of education. These aspects of the present technological

development are immensely important for developing countries. With regard to cultural diversity we are all developing countries, there are vested common interests at stake. One of the main priorities today is to ensure that the potential the information society is offering will become inclusive for all, bringing peoples together rather than dividing them, strengthening cultural diversity instead of weakening it.