

Mr. Gagne

We write to express our concerns and hopes for the upcoming World Summit for the Information Society (WSIS) and to contribute some important ideas for inclusion in the Draft Declaration of Principles.

CJFE is an association of 400 journalists, editors, publishers, producers, students and others who work to defend and promote press freedom and free expression in Canada and around the world.

We have two broad concerns about the WSIS Declaration:

(1) We strongly believe the WSIS deliberations, its declarations of principles and its action plan, should all be rooted in the right to freedom of expression as stated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We are pleased to note that reference (although not direct citation) is made to Article 19 (in article 10 of the Draft Declaration of Principles).

However, we believe it should receive higher and greater prominence in the Declaration. Free expression continues to be under attack around the world, and the WSIS could, perhaps unwittingly, contribute to more violations if it failed to more forcefully link itself to the ideals of Article 19. The reality is that almost half of the nations of the world currently practice some form of restriction on free expression. The Action Alert database of the International Freedom of Expression eXchange (IFEX) contains more than 12,000 alerts and reports on violations over the past 10 years. Each year we issue an additional 2,000 Alerts.

We all are aware of the controversy some years ago surrounding the New World Information and Communications Order and, in particular, the attempts by some governments to use NWICO as a justification for restricting free-expression rights. We realize that there are important issues of access, equity, diversity, multiculturalism, and equitable development being discussed in the WSIS process. However, the current state of affairs involving the alarming number of violations of freedom-of-expression rights, along with the unfortunate NWICO experience, leads us to urge that the utmost care be taken in these deliberations. No language should be incorporated in WSIS declarations which could, even remotely, be used to erode the right to free expression. For example, measures to promote something like "cultural diversity," while potentially laudable, could in the wrong hands be used to repress opinions.

This might be avoided by including, when referencing Article 19 of the Universal Declaration, a statement to the effect that "nothing else which follows should be construed to limit, restrict or reduce these rights."

We believe freedom of expression can and must be enhanced by the building of an information society. Indeed, we welcome the WSIS as an opportunity to do so.

2) Our second concern is the potential threat to free expression arising from the possible inclusion of language about states' rights to combat international terrorism. Usually this is described as a "balance" between free speech and national security. However, we believe the pendulum is swinging too far away from free-expression rights. In the period since 9/11, we have noted with alarm that many governments, some democratic and some not so democratic, have adopted national security measures which restrict free expression or access to information without adequate checks and balances. We believe governments must be vigilant to ensure that the WSIS does not create justifications for improper infringements of free-expression rights in the future.

We would like to raise an additional concern. The second gathering for the WSIS is currently scheduled for Tunisia in 2005. We have serious doubts about the selection of this location given the Tunisian government's record on issues of freedom of expression. In recent years our IFEX network has recorded and distributed 191 alerts and reports on free-expression violations in Tunisia. In particular we have noted the increasing government practice of censoring the Internet. As one of our colleague organizations, the Committee to Protect Journalists, has noted:

Through a combination of censorship and intimidation, Tunisian authorities have all but stamped out independent voices in the country's media, with the exception of a few courageous dissident journalists who publish their work underground, on the Internet, or in Western newspapers

Those who write critically about political affairs have faced an array of official reprisals: physical attacks, imprisonment, the banning of their publications, the withholding of state advertising, anonymous telephone threats, cut phone and fax lines, the removal of accreditation, and travel restrictions.

Given this situation we would urge relocation of the 2005 Summit to a country that is more respectful of what must be at the centre of the WSIS – freedom of expression.

Yours sincerely,

Joel, etc