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## **Freedom of information vital for promoting cultural diversity, says UN official**



29 November 2010 – Freedom of information, and universal access to it, is crucial to promoting cultural and linguistic diversity, and the United Nations is at the forefront of the battle to protect these rights, a senior information official has said.

“Free speech and media freedom are an inseparable part of the United Nations’ mission for peace, human development and a better world,” Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information Kiyoo Akasaka told a global seminar on linguistic diversity, globalization and development in Alexandria, Egypt, on Sunday.

“But around the world, we see Governments and those who wield power use many different ways to obstruct it. The Internet and digital media are becoming a new battleground for information.”

He cited the impressive pace of innovation and growth in new information and communications technologies (ICTs): by the end of 2010, there will be an estimated 5.3 billion mobile cell phone users; access to mobile networks is now available to 90 per cent of the world population and 80 per cent of people living in rural areas.

Moreover, the total number of text messages sent globally has tripled in the past three years, from 1.8 trillion to a staggering 6.1 trillion, that is 200,000 text messages sent every second, and the number of Internet users has doubled between 2005 and 2010, when it will surpass the 2 billion mark, of which 1.2 billion will be in developing countries.

But the digital divide remains, he warned, with 71 per cent of the population of developed countries online, compared to only 21 per cent in developing countries, and by the end of this year, Internet users in Africa will reach 9.6 per cent, far behind the world average of 30 per cent. For millions of people in poorer countries, downloading a high-quality movie can take one-and-a-half days compared to five minutes somewhere else.

All this increased connectivity and the role media and institutions can play in protecting and promoting cultural and linguistic diversity and ensuring its use for the greater good require two elements, Mr. Akasaka stressed.

“First, is the need to find ways to provide information to all people,” he said. “And second, is the need to ensure that the information that is conveyed – the substance – is diverse, pluralistic, and tolerant. Member States, the private sector, UNESCO and the United Nations are all working to bring information and communication assets and services to communities around the world.

“The statistics that I referred to earlier illustrate the huge progress we have made. I have no doubt that we will be able to close the digital divide. The greater challenge for all of us is to ensure that the information that we seek and crave access to is representative of the enormous diversity of peoples, languages, cultures, and views – political, religious, social, scientific. This is where Governments, libraries, universities, the media and cultural institutions can all play a crucial role.”

He urged universities and other institutions of higher education in Egypt and the Arab region to join the recently launched UN Academic Impact ([UNAI](#)), an initiative of Mr. Akasaka’s Department of Public Information (DPI) that seeks to create partnerships between the world body and academia and foster a culture of intellectual social responsibility.

Four Egyptian universities – Assiut, Benha, the American University in Cairo, and Université Senghor d’Alexandrie – have already joined the initiative, launched earlier this month by [Secretary-General](#) Ban Ki-moon, who said that by sharing ideas across borders and disciplines, “we can find solutions to the interconnected problems that cause so much suffering.”

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