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The late American media critic Neil Postman used to say, only half in jest, that freedom of the press was available to everyone ... who owned one. There is a persistent belief, even today, that a conspiracy exists among the owners of the press – thanks to their printing presses – to deprive the public of essential information which does not coincide with the owners' interests.

Happily, the emergence of the Internet and the possibility it gives to each and every citizen to become his or her own publisher of information and opinion is gradually putting these conspiracy theories in perspective. In fairness, it is giving a greater voice to all of those people who feel, for one reason or another, and some of them justifiably, that the media do not adequately express or reflect their views.

One billion people on our planet read a newspaper - in print - every day. And I feel at ease as a representative of newspapers in this electronic media forum because today this written press is now also very much an electronic medium, bringing news and information to an even wider audience through thousands and thousands of platforms created to exploit the new electronic distribution channels, most notably the web. And this is not a phenomenon reserved for the rich, developed world. Each week or month, new electronic information sources appear in some of the poorest, least developed nations, where increasingly skilled news men and women are leaping with alacrity over several stages of technological development to embrace and exploit the new platforms.

In more and more countries, the struggle for freedom of information, freedom of expression, freedom of the media, is today being fought out on the Internet rather than in print, where it has traditionally taken place. This week here in Geneva, scores of governments will be discussing how the net and other new forms of electronic information distribution can empower the voiceless and contribute to building prosperous 'knowledge societies'.

The stark truth, however, is that many of the principal barriers and obstacles to the free flow of information through these new channels have been erected and are being maintained by dozens of those very governments. The World Summit on the Information Society will be declaring its faith and conviction in the power of information and knowledge to radically change societies, at a time when governments all over the world, their pens poised to sign this declaration at the end of the week, are dreaming up new ways to gag and break the spirit of those men and women who are actually endeavouring to put into practice these ideas and principles.

And the unhappy fact is that it is largely in the poorest, least developed nations where this repression of information and opinion is at its most severe and where thousands of journalists, more and more of them 'cyber-reporters', are each year persecuted, murdered, beaten, arrested and imprisoned, often for doing no more than questioning the right of their governments to take information hostage and to deprive their fellow citizens of the right to open debate and the plurality of opinion.

Let us be optimistic and hope that the WSIS process will signal the beginning of serious endeavours to close not only the famous digital divide but also the moral and human rights divide which is just as instrumental in preventing hundreds of millions of our fellow humans from having their share of the peace and prosperity to which we all aspire.