



**Ávarp forseta Íslands
Ólafs Ragnars Grímssonar
á ráðstefnu fjölmiðla**

**"NEW MEDIA, NEW OPPORTUNITIES, NEW SOCIETIES"
11 August 2001**

Kæru ráðstefnugestir
fræðimenn og fjölmiðlafólk
Ladies and Gentlemen

Þegar Íslendingar hófu sjálfstæðisbaráttu sína fyrir 150 árum voru engin dagblöð í landinu, engin regluleg útgáfa sem færði fólki fréttir eða boðskap forystumanna, aðeins eitt fátæklegt ársrit íslenskra stúdenta í Kaupmannahöfn sem sáu í lýðræðisþróun Evrópu tækifæri fyrir fámenna eyþjóð til að sækja rétt sinn til sjálfstjórnar.

Styrkur sjálfstæðisbaráttunnar fólst fyrst og fremst í samheldni hins íslenska samfélags, sögulegri vitund um menningu og tungu, skilningi á eðli þjóðarinnar sem átti sér rætur í fornum sögum skráðum á þrettándu öld og landnámi víkinga sem yfirgáfu Noreg í leit að betra landi sem veitti þeim aðstæður til sjálfstjórnar og fullveldis án íhlutunar konungsins sem kröfur gerði um hollustu og hlýðni.

Það er að vísu stundum sagt í gamni að það hafi verið sjálfstæðustu og framsæknustu Norðmennirnir sem ákváðu að yfirgefa kónginn og halda til Íslands, hafi á leiðinni yfir hafið komið við í Færeyjum og þar hafi hinir sjóveiku verið settir í land og látnir verða eftir – Færeyingar vinir okkar segja að vísu að þeir sem urðu eftir í Færeyjum hafi haft vit á því að fara ekki lengra.

It is the common heritage, the interlinked history embracing more than a thousand years which has enabled the Nordic countries to establish in modern times a wide ranging cooperation which in many ways is unique when viewed from a global perspective.

Iceland shows us in this respect how a nation can at the same time be deeply conscious of ancient cultural traditions, profoundly effected by a strong sense of history and also one of the most connected hi-tech societies in the world with top rations of internet usage, personal computers and mobile phones found anywhere on the globe.

The arrival of the new information technologies became so significant because they enhanced the opportunities already prevailing in a culture of communication which has its roots in the settlement and the creation of the Althingi, the Icelandic Parliament more than a thousand years ago, in the literary excellence of the sagas and the customs of storytelling, in the poems and verses which each generation gave to the other, in the political traditions strengthened by the independence struggle throughout the 19th century and in modern times was given a broad presentation in a great number of newspapers, national, regional and local that have been published in Iceland for shorter or longer periods and also in the numerous radio and television stations that dominate our society today.

It is indeed a challenging subject to study how a nation of 280.000 people, having up to the year 1900 never exceeded 100.000, can find the material, the manpower and the need to make such an extensive system of communications meaningful and relevant both in social and personal terms, and bearing in mind that over a half of the 280.000 we have here today are children and old age pensioners so it is just over 100.000 people who are responsible for this extensive output of media material.

When we examine the nature and the effect of the new media, and study the new opportunities and analyse the creation of new communities it is important not to forget that despite the newness around us and the constant flow of innovations we are still deeply moulded by history, by the cultural heritage, by the roots created by previous generations, by the identity which other eras, other ages made their legacy.

We can never escape the boundaries formed by our historical heritage nor can we avoid the philosophical and moral challenges involved in looking for the fundamental purpose of it all, of the media, new and old, of the available technologies, new and old, of the different communities, whether newly emerging or long ago established.

The evolution of our civilisation has been primarily judged by a criteria inspired by democracy, human rights and the search for knowledge. We honour the philosophers and lawmakers of ancient Athens and Rome and here in Iceland we still refer to the example

provided by the establishment of the Althingi, the Icelandic Parliament at Thingvellir, more than a thousand years ago, making the democratic rule of law the essence of the new community of settlers – and it is indeed striking that the population of Athens, Rome and Iceland in these ancient times when foundations were laid for our philosophical and democratic traditions were similar in their smallness. Perhaps that is a reminder for us today that unions of nations, creating a common market or common systems, measured in hundreds of millions of people are not necessarily the best way to realise the high goals of human and social development.

Democracy, knowledge and human rights – these have been the cornerstones of the political system which the Nordic countries have proudly advanced and which in the 21st century seems to be the aspirations of nations all over the world.

These must also remain the criteria when we examine how the new media and the new opportunities will effect our communities and how the new generations empowered with these new tools of communication will conduct their affairs.

How will democracy change? How will the political parties adapt? How will issue organisations and pressure groups utilise the new opportunities to strengthen their influence? How will elections be affected? How will parliaments and the legislative process be transformed? How globalised will the impact be? How dominant will the market be in determining the relative influence of different forms of participation? How will the free or cheap forms of expression created by the new technologies effect the powers of the established and financially strong media? How fragmented will society become? How will the individual be effected, the citizen, the voter, the activist – the thinking human being who in the tradition of western civilisation and democracy is supposed to be the cornerstone of our open society?

How will the youngest generation which now is using computer centres in their kindergartens become democratically active when in twenty years time or so it enters the political system in full force being the first generation in world history empowered to seek knowledge and establish allegencies entirely based on its own free will – unhindered by the boundaries if established associations or powerful institutions?

How can our scientific and scholarly endeavourers help to predict the evolution of democracy in the 21st century or estimate how the transformation of the media and our social communications by these new technologies will effect the relationship between the individual and

society and make the human rights we have inherited a living experience of a more profoundly civilised world?

There will undoubtedly be a great diversity in the answers given to these questions and some participants will even claim that these issues are not even relevant at all. But Nordic scholars are above all fortunate in being at the same time citizens of the most open democratic societies in the world, the most highly inter connected communities in modern times and also culturally empowered with a strong sense of history and tradition.

It is therefore highly appropriate that the 15:e nordiska konferensen för medie- och kommunikationsforskning should set itself the task to discuss some of these challenging issues and I hope that Iceland with its sense of ancient heritage and modern opportunities will serve as an inspiring location for your deliberation.

With these reflections it gives me great pleasure to declare the 15:e nordiska konferensen för medie- och kommunikationsforskning formally opened.