

Remarks at the 58th World Newspaper Congress

The Honorable President Gavin O' Reilly of the World Association of Newspapers, Chairman Chang Dae-whan of the Korean Newspapers Association, and distinguished guests from home and abroad,

Congratulations on the opening of the 58th World Newspaper Congress. I wholeheartedly welcome the publishers of newspapers, editors and journalists from around the world to Korea.

This year marks the 400th anniversary of the printed newspaper. In the early 13th century, Korea invented movable metal type for the first time in the world. I am pleased that this significant event is being held in Seoul, the Republic of Korea.

I am deeply thankful to all those who worked hard to prepare the Congress.

Distinguished guests,

Newspapers are the oldest and most familiar media. Countless people around the global village keep in touch with the world through newspapers every morning. I, too, start my day with a newspaper.

The history of newspapers can be said to be the history of democracy and the enhancement of human rights. There have been many instances when one sentence in a report or one photograph changed history. Even at this time, journalists are laboring everywhere in the world for the cause of freedom, justice and peace. I am deeply grateful to all you now gathered here and all other journalists in the world.

Our newspapers, too, have been doing their utmost to live up to their mission despite historic tribulations. Some newspapers were closed down and hundreds of journalists were driven out of work while standing up to the Japanese colonial occupier and dictators. We owe our flawless democracy to the newspapers and journalists who nevertheless did not break their pens.

Distinguished participants,

I am aware that the Congress is taking up the crisis facing newspapers and innovative strategies to solve it. To give my conclusion first, the key to success is to lift the democratic nature and responsibility of newspapers to a higher level.

Many people talk about the crisis of newspapers, but newspapers still enjoy formidable influence. It is not too much to describe it as power.

Gone is the time when the power of government dominated all things. The government has become transparent and has been transformed into a participatory government. There is no longer one major entity that steers the agenda in the public sphere in a monopolistic manner. The Government, enterprises, citizens, Netizens, newspapers and broadcasters are all setting the agenda.

Among them, newspapers are the most well established organization in the public sphere. However, they are weaker than the government in the sense that they lack executive power, but they enjoy rather more power in steering the agenda for the state or communities.

Since the debut of civil society in the 18th century, the role of the press in maintaining a check has been emphasized, and accordingly, the protection of the freedom of press has been emphasized. However, this failed to consider the fact that the press itself could become a political power through a monopoly of the market and monopolistic governance. Hence, neither an institutional alternative capable of keeping the press in check nor a market mechanism has been well developed.

In this light, it is very important to provide for an institutional device capable of restraining the abuse of power by the press. Journalists must maintain a sense of ethics and self-restraint.

One step in this task is to equip the press with democratic governance. When the press is equipped with a reasonable intramural structure to guarantee freedom and diversity of expression, it will become a reliable democratic entity and will be qualified to keep watch on and criticize society.

We should promote a diverse and balanced forum of public debate. If media that are bent on promoting the interests of specific controlling groups or values dominate the market, the socially weak will lose ground.

A sense of responsibility in setting the agenda is also very important. Citizens will retain hope when newspapers speak for the future, but confrontation and friction will be inflamed when newspapers speak for distrust and hate. We should look at whether or not newspapers are even now continually inflating suspicions about such sensitive issues as weapons of mass destruction, thus inciting distrust and consequently fanning confrontation among countries while at the same time speaking about peace.

The function of the press to criticize must be emphasized in a society where freedom and human rights are endangered. However, in a society where the critical issue is social cohesion and not democracy, the press should present future-oriented and creative alternatives, instead of fanning friction.

I believe that recovering the trust of readers through such endeavors will be the way to overcome the crisis of newspapers.

Distinguished guests,

The last several years have seen a measurable change in the press environment in our country. No longer does the Government exercise any unreasonable pressure on the press. Criticism by the media against the Government is so liberal that one could say it has gone too far. The Government positively accepts valid criticism, but demands corrections when it does not conform to the facts.

The Government has been expanding the right of the people to know and the opportunities for citizens to participate in state affairs by disclosing administrative information to the fullest possible extent and in the most transparent fashion. In parallel, efforts will be made to provide an institutional base to ensure free and fair competition among the media and to help promote the development of the newspaper industry by establishing a newspaper development fund, among other things.

Distinguished journalists,

The future of newspapers is the future of democracy. Humanity will greet the arrival of a more peaceful and happier world when you, retaining a firm conviction in democracy, write the truth with justice and hope.

I expect that this Congress will reconfirm the role and mission of newspapers, and serve as a precious opportunity to open a future brimming with hope.

I hope that all of you will enjoy a pleasant and rewarding time during your stay in Korea.

Thank you.