



Opening Address
President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson

Ladies and Gentlemen

When we Icelanders began our struggle for independence some 150 years ago, we had no newspapers, no periodicals that regularly brought news – or even messages from our distant rulers – to the people. All we had was a simple, very simple, annual published by the Icelandic students in Copenhagen, who saw in the political developments in Europe of that day the chance that a small island-nation might be able to realize its right to self-determination.

The strength of the independence movement rested chiefly in the cohesion and solidarity of the Icelandic people, a consciousness of our common heritage and language, a feeling for the character of the nation that had its roots in the ancient sagas, put down in writing in the thirteenth century, and the settlements of the Vikings. But also the fact that our founding fathers and mothers were Vikings who left Norway to find better land and to be able to make their own decisions without the interference of any king who demanded their submission and allegiance.

Here in Iceland we often say, in jest more or less, that it was the most self-reliant and progressive Norwegians who decided to pull up stakes and leave their king to set off for Iceland. And on the way, they stopped off at the Faroes, where those who were too seasick to carry on were put ashore and left to their own devices. Our friends in the Faroes have their own version, of course: namely, that it was those wise enough not to sail on, who settled there.

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

Iceland shows us in this respect how a nation can at one and the same time be deeply conscious of ancient cultural traditions, profoundly affected by a strong sense of history and also one of the most connected hi-tech societies in the world with some of the highest levels of internet usage and personal computer and mobile phone ownership 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 next, and in the political traditions strengthened by the campaign for independence throughout the 19th century, and in modern times was given a broad presentation in the large 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, which until the year 1900 never exceeded 100,000, can find the resources, the manpower and the need to make such an extensive system of communications meaningful and relevant in both social and personal terms – especially when we bear in mind that over half of the 280,000 people we have here today are children and old-age pensioners, meaning that 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 all this, of the media, new and old, of the available technologies, new and old, of the different communities, whether newly emerging or long established.

The evolution of our civilisation has been primarily judged by 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, which made the democratic rule of law the essence of the new community of settlers – and it is indeed striking that the populations of Athens, Rome and Iceland in these ancient times, when foundations were laid for our philosophical and democratic traditions, were similarly small. Perhaps that is a reminder for us today that unions of nations, creating a common market or common systems and measured in hundreds of millions of people, are not necessarily the best way to realise the lofty 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 aspiration of nations all over the world.

These must also remain the criteria when we examine how the new media and new opportunities will affect 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 organisations dedicated to specific issues 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 affect the powers of the established and financially strong media? How fragmented will society become? How will the individual be affected, 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 its kindergartens become democratically active when, in twenty years time or so, it enters the political system with full force as the first generation in world history empowered to seek knowledge and establish allegiances entirely based on its own free will – unhindered by the boundaries of established associations or powerful institutions?

How can our scientific and scholarly endeavours 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 affect the relationship between the individual and society and make the human rights we have inherited into a living experience of a more profoundly civilised world?

There will undoubtedly be 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 interconnected communities in modern times, and also culturally empowered with a strong sense of history and tradition.

It is therefore highly appropriate that the 15:th Nordic Conference on Media and Communication Research 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 deliberations.

With these reflections it gives me great pleasure to declare the 15:e Nordic Conference on Media and Communication formally opened.

