



**Speech of Ambassador Angelina Eichhorst, Head of the Delegation of
the European Union to Lebanon**

FORUM 4M BEYROUTH
Informer en ligne dans le Monde arabe : risques, pratiques, économie

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Excellencies,

H.E. Patrice Paoli, Ambassador of France to Lebanon,

Mr. Etienne Fiatte, Director of Canal France International,

Mrs Gisele Khoury, President of the Samir Kassir Foundation,

Dear writers, journalists, bloggers, media actors, activists,

Dear participants,

Freedom of expression is an essential ingredient of democracy. Giving every citizen the right to share, express and hear the views of others, the

right to know how you are governed, the right to make a fair and open choice. No wonder it is a freedom long protected and treasured, well before the digital age. And then there was the Internet: a new platform for free expression. The power of information back into the hands of citizens.

Online activity is inherently political where it touches the freedom of expression. The freedom of expression is a fundamental human right both online and offline, and of vital importance to the European Union.

Today's conference is part of the “Media Neighbourhood” the European Union has been funding since 2011. We would like to help establish a journalism practice community in all countries neighbouring Europe. Professionalism, quality and ethical standards come into play. I have been told a lot of progress has been made so far.

To date, the public sphere has become inconceivable without the Internet and the freedom it provides. This is certainly the case for Lebanon where people are constantly connected to discuss politics, events and share their views, communicate, learn from others. Digital expression, online journalism allow for such mobilisation. During the Arab uprisings “bloggers were the electronic pamphleteers for the street activists” as the Egyptian blogger and Mona Eltahawy, winner of the Samir Kassir Award

in 2009, said.

To date 135 million individuals in 22 Arab countries use the Internet; more than 71 million of them are active users of social networks. 41% of those users claim to connect with friends on social media several times a day. Millions of exchanges per day in this region only, linking up within and across borders at a massive scale.

At the same time, online media still need to work towards getting more trustworthy. It is said 52% of the Lebanese find that political information on social networks cannot be trusted. Traditional media such as TV channels are seen to be more credible. Therefore it is all the more important that online activists ensure that their writings comply with high quality standards, that facts haven been checked and that subjective opinions are identifiable as such.

Sticking to such standards is particularly crucial when taking into account that online media often enjoy a higher degree of freedom than the traditional press and hence bear an enormous potential.

Dear friends,

Online journalism and social media must not develop outside a legal

framework. Every game must have its rules. The European Union guidelines on “Freedom of Expression” spell out the need for rules to online journalism, serving a twofold purpose.

First laws need to guarantee the right to freedom of expression in the web space. You all know that journalists and other media actors in the Arab region continue to be harassed or even imprisoned for exerting the right to raise their voice. Second, the law also has to protect the right to privacy and personal data of the media actors as well as of those connected to them. Thirdly, the law has to be implemented.

Lebanon should be a forerunner not a backbencher. There is no reason not to have a mature law and implement it. It shows the country knows how to respond to digital change. With the European Union, we have to confront the challenge every day. Many questions need to be answered. They will not go away. Today's message is if you as a country aspire to development and democracy you have to aspire to digital freedom. Lebanon, say to the world we will protect free speech and a free media, and we will say "Thank you Lebanon".

Thank you.