Dear colleagues,

Let me thank the Institut Supérieur de l’Information et de la Communication for hosting this roundtable in its premises. In my function of Secretary of UNESCO’s International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC), I would also like to thank Spain for its generous support to this project which aims to prevent violence and further gender equality through media by inter alia the provision of technical support to the setting up of the National Press Council here in Morocco and in promoting its role of mediator between media and public.

I am honoured to be here today to talk to you – and with you – about the links between journalistic deontology, self-regulation and Media and Information Literacy (MIL). Together these have a fundamental role in protecting Freedom of Expression and for creating an enabling environment for a pluralist, gender-sensitive, independent and professional journalism and, hence, an informed public. As we know from history, these two elements – quality journalism and an informed public - are indispensable for peaceful solutions to conflicts, as well as to achieving knowledge societies and the world’s Sustainable Development Goals.

Today, more than ever, and here in Morocco as anywhere else in the world, we need an informed and critical public. Overwhelmed by an unprecedented quantity of information circulating at an unprecedented speed, the public nowadays finds itself in the midst of all this information and cannot always adequately discern quality and professional journalism from weak journalism, public relations, trivia, and disinformation.
Deontology and MIL go hand in hand, and it is therefore symbolic that this round table is taking place within the framework of the Moroccan edition of the Media and Information Literacy Week 2017. This round-table is the 100th event taking place in more than 40 countries worldwide to mark the Week this year. It allows us to exchange knowledge and debate changes in the concepts of Media and Information Literacy. It is the year occasion since 2012 that UNESCO has regularly organized the global MIL Week, and it is excellent to see the range of activities in Morocco this year.

MIL can be defined as a set of competencies that empower citizens to access, retrieve, understand, evaluate, use - but also create and share - information and media content in all formats, using various tools, in a critical, ethical and effective way, in order to participate and engage in personal, professional and societal activities.

I have heard it said that in today’s society, “you are what you share”. If this is at least partly true, what does it make us then if – no matter our intentions, we share rumours or fraudulent news, and do we want to be such persons? Would we not prefer to be spreading verified information and informed comment – such as disseminating to our networks examples of quality journalism based on ethics and professional standards.

In this sense, the diffusion of MIL among the public of readers/listeners/viewers of media can be an indispensable ally for the development of credible and professional media standards in as much as it supports the shaping of a critical and informed public – one that appreciates, promotes, shares and defends the practice of journalism and the values of press freedom.

In other words, MIL can provide the necessary tools and competencies to fuel a virtuous relation between journalistic content producers and their audiences.

We know that deontology is also a key element of the work of a journalist and of other media professionals. Ideally implemented according to voluntary mechanisms of self-regulation, deontology consists of a set of principles and techniques which guide media professionals to adequately and freely fulfill their work and therefore their role towards society: that of informing people and giving them the necessary information and tools to understand the society they live in. Professional standards for journalism are built on deontology.

Deontology also represents a scale against which the quality of any journalistic or media work can – and should – be assessed. Of course, deontology is not just for journalists but indeed it should serve for editors and media owners to have standards and boundaries in their work. In fact, journalistic deontology is relevant to anyone posting news on social media.

Professional standards on the one side contribute to quality journalism; on the other they can also shield from unjust criticism, lawsuits and – ultimately – censorship. Self-
regulation is the way that journalists hold themselves accountable for living up to professional standards. And the way that the public can understand journalism, and follow journalistic standards in their own media production.

A press council provides the institutional underpinning of self-regulation and the upholding of professional standards. According to UNESCO’s new report on World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development, there are unprecedented pressures – economic, political, and commercial – on the independence of the media – but there is also increased interest in self-regulation by the news industry, as well as by social media companies.

However, there is no standard “model” for a self-regulatory Press Council. On the contrary, each Press Council should have its own unique characters which are the result of each single country’s media environment, history and actors. Nevertheless, there are certain features that are common among Press Councils everywhere in the world. An example is that a council should strive to include representatives of all main stakeholders in a country’s media environment: journalists, media owners, editors, representatives of relevant union and – of course – the public.

The establishment of a Press Council does not necessarily require new legislation. However, when specific legislation is present and foresees the setting up of a Press Council, this is often defined as “statutory regulation.” This legislative foundation should not be automatically confused with state regulation, although it may often also be the basis for this kind of regulation.

Thus, even if a press council is a creature of statute, it can function successfully if the majority its membership is appointed independently of government, and if it functions with fidelity to professional standards. Its credibility will be enhanced if it also champions press freedom, as the essential precondition for self-regulation.

Indeed, a press council should always help to promote press freedom, which is a necessary condition for self-regulation rather than state regulation. An enabling environment for freedom of expression and a self-regulatory deontological framework are essential elements to ensure that the press can freely and fully perform its task of informing the citizens.

All this is not for the benefit of professional journalism in the abstract, but also, and beyond all, for the benefit of the public.

However, today the public is no longer just a consumer; it is nowadays more proactive than ever, it produces various kinds of news or para-news, distributes other news, and interacts with the news media.

Today, a press council needs to help citizens understand how news media operates, and how society can interact with media and with social media and information in general. Therefore, the more this public is MIL literate, the more it will understand of the
importance of freedom of expression, of self-regulation, and of the value of deontology. And the more the public will help demand high quality journalistic content and standards from the news media – and on social media. Public support for quality journalism is

The activities of a Press council play a fundamental role in advancing MIL competences within the public such as by allowing for a regular and transparent interaction between news media with its public. The public can be encouraged and supported to be active, to complain about poor quality journalistic content, to call for the respect of professional standards, and to defend journalism from attack. With the existence of Press Councils, the public is therefore encouraged to be more informed and aware of journalistic practice. In a sense, we can therefore say that a credible Press Council can also play a pedagogical role, as on one side it encourages the press to respect professional standards and on the other invites the public to critically interact with the press.

Press Councils can in fact help journalists to establish a transparent and trustworthy relation with their audience. Press Councils indeed play a crucial role in mediating between the press and the public and in promoting credible and quality journalism which furthers an enabling, pluralistic, tolerant and democratic environment. Such an environment is an indispensable component of an open and tolerant society which can counter hate speech leading to violence.

It is in this spirit, that Councils can also therefore raise awareness beyond its deontological business, but also the importance to everyone of freedom of expression, press freedom and safety of journalists.

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We are seeing that MIL is gaining momentum in this country, with all the activities planned this week, so allow me then to conclude with one question for follow up: How, in systematic practice, can the soon-to-be-established Moroccan National Press Council play its own part in building these competencies in this country?

I wish this round table success and I am looking forward to a rich and fruitful debate.

Thank you for your attention.