Launching of the "wireless hotspots" at Makerere University on 30 March (address by Anders Johnson, Ambassador of Sweden)

Chair, Ag Vice-Chancellor, Dear participants

During the last decade we have seen the revolution in mobile communication and Internet connections. Fax machines are definitely yesterday, and classical phone directories are more or less out of business. Today there are approximately 4 billion mobile phone users worldwide. The number of Internet users is approaching 2 billion. For several billion people, the village has become a truly global one.

In many respects, information has never been so free. There are more ways to spread more ideas to more people than at any moment in history. Information networks are helping people discover new facts and making governments more accountable – this applies to Sweden as well as to Uganda. Access to information helps citizens hold their own governments accountable, generates new ideas, encourages creativity and entrepreneurship

On their own, new technologies do not take sides in the struggle for freedom and progress, but Sweden does. We stand for principles where all of humanity has equal access to knowledge and ideas. And we recognize that the world's information infrastructure will become what we and others make of it. Our responsibility to help ensure the free exchange of ideas goes back to our own constitution. Sweden's first Freedom of the Press Act was introduced as early as 1766. It was based on the conviction already at that time that you cannot develop without an informed society. That's why we believe it's critical that its users are assured certain basic freedoms.

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The Universal Declaration on Human Rights tells us that all people have the right "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." Freedom of expression is no longer defined solely by whether citizens can go into the city streets and criticize their government without fear of retribution. Blogs, emails, social networks, and text messages have opened up new forums for exchanging ideas.

Uganda has made important commitments to these principles as set out in Chapter 4 of the Constitution stating that "every person shall have the freedom of speech and expression which shall include the freedom of the press and other media". It is especially important in view of the forthcoming elections that these principles are upheld, to ensure a credible and peaceful election process. Free media has an important role to hold decision-makers accountable as well as to enable citizens to make informed choices. Freedom of speech is a constitutional right. In that perspective, Sweden is closely observing the Government's review of the proposed amendment of the Press and Journalists Bill and we hope such a review be done in accordance with international standards and with respect for free and fair electoral process.

These forums for exchanging ideas, e.g on the internet, have also created new targets for censorship. Amid this unprecedented surge in connectivity, we must also recognize that these technologies are not an unmitigated blessing. These tools are also being exploited to undermine human progress and political rights. Just as nuclear power can either energize a city or destroy it, modern information networks and the technologies they support can be harnessed for good or for ill. Technologies with the potential to open up access to government and promote transparency can also be hijacked by governments and other actors to crush dissent and deny human rights.

We do not tolerate those who incite others to violence and hate speech, that targets individuals on the basis of their race, religion, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. But these challenges must not become an excuse for governments to violate the rights and privacy of those who use the media and internet for peaceful political purposes and to spread truth and expose injustice.

Universities are by their very nature not only communities of teachers and scholars (the Latin meaning) but above all centres of learning and excellence, centres of innovative ideas and agents of change – "hot-spots" in many respects. And internet is a powerful tool also in that respect.

Talent may be distributed universally, but opportunity is not. It is therefore very natural that Swedish support to building research capacity in Uganda mainly through collaboration with Makerere University also includes support to the ICT project. The University recognized and positioned ICT as the most cost-effective means of:

Increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of research and research linkages;

Providing a modern learning environment with easy access to local and international online resources;

Providing increased opportunity of access to quality education for the majority of students who qualify but cannot be admitted to Makerere or other local universities; and for addressing academic and administrative management that were almost grinding to halt due to the pressure of numbers.

Freedom on the Internet is strongly linked to security with regard to network functions and user integrity. At the same time, there is an important balance of interests between, on the one hand, the freedom of users and the protection of personal integrity, and on the other, the requirement for security and control to stop the Internet from being misused.

The many challenges facing the use of the new technologies show that there is a need for more stringent compliance with the international rules that protect freedom of expression. Protection of the use of the Internet needs to be strengthened.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression has asked for Sweden's participation in a first expert meeting to draw up principles for freedom of expression on the Internet.

Sweden will be convening such a meeting in 2010. The aim of this meeting will be to collect ideas on how freedom of expression and other human rights in electronic media could be clarified and given stronger international protection, and to include these ideas in the Special Rapporteur's report to the UN Human Rights Council in 2011.

Freedom and security on the Internet are one of the greatest global challenges of the future Our efforts to promote and protect the freedoms of cyberspace should go hand in hand with protecting the infrastructure of cyberspace, which is increasingly important to our societies.

Much like the way the rule of the law is critical to protecting the freedoms we enjoy as citizens in our societies, and international law protects the peace between our nations, we must seek to shape the rules that will protect the rights and the freedom of cyberspace.

This area of international affairs is still in its infancy but is of tremendous importance for the future of the international community. There are difficult issues to tackle. The Swedish Government has raised the issue of Internet freedom as part of our human rights agenda and freedom of expression, and we will continue to highlight this and related issues. I am sure we are in good partnership with the freedom loving Ugandan people, not least the leadership of Makerere, lecturers and student-users of the facilities – hot-spots – now being established. I am sure they will all come to good use.

Thank you for listening.