Global Summit of Women Speakers of Parliament
Abu Dhabi 12-13 December 2016
Session 4: The Changing Dynamic of Political Communication
Opening Statement by the President of the Senate of the Netherlands, Ankie Broekers-Knol

Let me first express my gratitude to Dr. Amal Al Qubaisi for organizing this important conference, the Global Summit of Women Speakers of Parliament. The warm welcome and the excellent organization of the conference are truly impressive. Thank you.

Dear colleagues, Women Speakers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

During this panel session we will likely discuss the many advantages to social media. Let me mention a couple:

- After television, social media are becoming the ultimate tool for reaching the masses; the voters. And social media are becoming the tool of the masses, the voters, to influence politics. People have found a voice through the internet.
- Social media provide a new and interactive system of communication within the public sphere. Social media spread ideas and information exponentially from one user to the other.
- And social media allow for individual self-expression, which is a key component of democratic participation.

All these things are true. But I hope you will allow me to play 'devil's advocate' for a minute and to present you with some counterarguments. I believe that social media also have potentially dangerous drawbacks. The brevity and speed of messages on social media can cause for political statements to be taken completely **out of context**.

There is no room to present the whole argument or to tell the full story. Short, quick messages have the pretense of considered opinions, but leave a lot a room for interpretation.

Another danger is something called **social media silo's**. This term describes the fact that the information that reaches people through social media is shaped by what they want to hear. For instance, the people you follow on Twitter are often the people you agree with or look up to. As we all know, the lens through which people see politics and politicians is extraordinarily powerful. On social media, people don't realize they're not getting the full picture.

Thirdly, messages with a **negative content** are more frequent and have far more success on social media than messages with a positive content. In the Netherlands, but also in the United Kingdom and Italy, negative messages on social media - like brash comments, insults or angry demands - have even influenced the outcome of referenda. They have the power to persuade the public.

The overwhelming amount of negative claims and counter-claims on social media has had an impact on public opinion. In some cases, political parties have even resorted to spreading **fake news items** in order to get their points across. Because communication on social media is (nearly) unrestricted, there is no way to control this. There is even evidence to suggest that social media messages with high arousal emotions such as anger and irritation spread faster than messages focusing on rational economic arguments.

All these aspects of social media have potentially dangerous consequences.

Especially in an age where information, opinions, political ideas and messages are shared at an exceedingly high pace, but wisdom and knowledge decidedly less so.

Therefore, my statement to you today is that the challenge of our time is to combine the potential of direct democracy through social media with our system of representative democracy. Political communication can only benefit from social networking if we use social networking sites with **skill, caution, common sense and - yes - also an open mind.**