THE HOLY SEE
Human Dimension Sessions of the 2010 Review Conference
26 – 28 November 2010, Astana
*Working Session 4***:** *The Development of Electronic Media and its Implications for Media Freedom and Pluralism, Including the Digital Switchover in Broadcasting and Free Flow of Information on the Internet*
Friday, November 26, 2010

Madam Moderator,

1.   The new digital technologies are, indeed, bringing about fundamental shifts in patterns of communication and human relationships. Many benefits flow from this new culture of communication: families are able to maintain contact across great distances; students and researchers have more immediate and easier access to documents, sources and scientific discoveries, hence they can work collaboratively from different locations; moreover, the interactive nature of many of the new media facilitates more dynamic forms of learning and communication, thereby contributing to social progress.

The Internet can serve people in their responsible use of freedom and democracy, expand the range of choices available in diverse spheres of life, broaden educational and cultural horizons, break down divisions, promote human development in a multitude of ways. But that is not the whole story. The Internet can unite people, but it also can divide them, both as individuals and as mutually suspicious groups separated by ideology, politics, possessions, race and ethnicity, intergenerational differences, and even religion. Already it has been used in aggressive ways, almost as a weapon of war, and people speak of the danger of cyber-terrorism. It would be painfully ironic if this instrument of communication, with so much potential for bringing people together, became an arena of international conflict.

2.   The Holy See is concerned about what today is called the "digital divide"—a form of discrimination dividing the rich from the poor, both within and among nations, on the basis of access, or lack of access, to the new information technology. The expression "digital divide" underlines the fact that individuals, groups, and nations must have access to the new technology in order to share in the promised benefits of globalization and development and not fall further behind. Ways need to be found to make the Internet accessible to less advantaged groups, either directly or at least by linking it with lower-cost traditional media. Cyberspace ought to be a resource of comprehensive information and services available to all, and in a wide range of languages. Public institutions have a particular responsibility to establish and maintain sites of this kind.

3.   The question of freedom of expression on the Internet is similarly complex and gives rise to another set of concerns. My Delegation strongly supports freedom of expression and the free exchange of ideas. Freedom to seek and know the truth is a fundamental human right and freedom of expression is a cornerstone of democracy. In light of these requirements of the common good, we deplore attempts by public authorities to block access to information—on the Internet or in other media of social communication—because they find it threatening or embarrassing to them, to

manipulate the public by propaganda and disinformation, or to impede legitimate freedom of expression and opinion. Authoritarian regimes are by far the worst offenders in this regard; but the problem also exists in liberal democracies, where access to media for political expression often depends on wealth, and politicians and their advisors violate truthfulness and fairness by misrepresenting opponents and shrinking issues to sound-bite dimensions.

4. To inform the consciences of individuals and help shape their thinking is never a neutral task. Authentic communication demands principled courage and resolve. It requires a determination of those working in the media not to wilt under the weight of so much information nor even to be content with partial or provisional truths. It is necessary not only that the competent authorities be vigilant regarding internet crimes, but also that journalists and media experts develop a Code of Conduct that excludes degrading statements on ethnic and religious groups or attacks against the dignity of the human person. In this context the Delegation of the Holy See would like to recall the principles of the ethical dimensions of the Information Society enshrined in the Geneva Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action (cf. World Summit on the Information Society, Geneva 2003). In this way the media can contribute constructively to the propagation of all that is good and true. Those who are active in the production and dissemination of new media content, therefore, should strive to *respect* the dignity and worth of the human person. If the new technologies are to serve the good of individuals and of society, all users will avoid the sharing of words and images that are degrading of human beings, that promote hatred and intolerance, against religious communities, that debase the goodness and intimacy of human sexuality or that exploit the weak and vulnerable.

Participation in the mass media arises from their nature as a good destined for all people. As a public service, social communication requires a spirit of cooperation and co-responsibility with vigorous accountability of the use of public resources and the performance of roles of public trust, including recourse to regulatory standards and other measures or structures designed to effect this goal.

Formation in the responsible and critical use of the media helps people to use them intelligently and appropriately. The profound impact upon the mind of new vocabulary and of images, which the electronic media in particular so easily introduce into society, cannot be overestimated. Precisely because contemporary media shape popular culture, they themselves must overcome any temptation to manipulate, especially the young, and instead pursue the desire to form and serve. In this way they protect, rather than erode, the fabric of a civil society worthy of the human person.

Thank you, Madam Moderator.