



**THE HOLY SEE**  
**2012 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting**  
*Working Session 1: Fundamental Freedoms I. Freedom of expression,  
free media and information*  
**Monday, September 24, 2012**

Mr. Chairperson,

1. The impact of social communication can hardly be exaggerated. Here people come into contact with other people and with events, form their opinions and values. Not only do they transmit and receive information and ideas through these instruments but often they experience living itself as an experience of media. Technological change rapidly is making the media of communication even more pervasive and powerful. Information society is a real cultural revolution. The range and diversity of media accessible to people in well-to-do countries already are astonishing: books and periodicals, television and radio, films and videos, audio recordings, electronic communication transmitted over the airwaves, over cable and satellite, via the Internet. The contents of this vast outpouring range from hard news to pure entertainment, prayer to pornography, contemplation to violence. Depending on how they use media, people can grow in sympathy and compassion or become isolated in a narcissistic, self-referential world of stimuli with near-narcotic effects. Not even those who shun the media can avoid contact with others who are deeply influenced by them.

2. 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.

3. At the same time, the Holy See also believes that ethical principles and norms relevant in other fields also apply to social communication. Ethics in social communication is concerned not just with what appears on cinema and television screens, on radio broadcasts, on the printed page and the Internet, but with a great deal

else besides. The ethical dimension relates not just to the content of communication and the process of communication, but to fundamental structural and systemic issues, often involving large questions of policy bearing upon the distribution of sophisticated technology and product. These questions point to other questions with economic and political implications for ownership and control. At least in open societies with market economies, the largest ethical question of all may be how to balance profit against service to the public interest understood according to an inclusive conception of the common good.

4. Considered from an ethical perspective, freedom of expression and freedom of the media is not, however, absolute. There are obvious instances—for example, libel and slander, messages that seek to foster hatred and conflict among individuals and groups, obscenity and pornography, the morbid depiction of violence—where no right to communicate exists. Plainly, too, free expression should always observe principles like truth, fairness, and respect for privacy. Professional communicators should be actively involved in developing and enforcing ethical codes of behavior for their profession, in cooperation with public representatives. Religious bodies and other groups likewise deserve to be part of this continuing effort. 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, Mister Chairperson.