



PERMANENT MISSION OF THE HOLY SEE  
TO THE ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY  
AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

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**STATEMENT BY MONSIGNOR MICHAEL W. BANACH,  
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE HOLY SEE,  
AT THE CLOSING PLENARY SESSION OF THE CONFERENCE  
“INTERNET 2013: SHAPING POLICIES  
TO ADVANCE MEDIA FREEDOM”**

**15 FEBRUARY 2013**

Mister Chairman,

1. The Holy See expresses its gratitude to the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media for organizing this important and timely Conference dedicated to *“Internet 2013: Shaping Policies to Advance Media Freedom.”* Our deliberations these past days have clearly revealed that today’s revolution in social communications involves a fundamental reshaping of the elements by which people comprehend the world about them, and verify and express what they comprehend. The constant availability of images and ideas, and their rapid transmission even from continent to continent, have profound consequences, both positive and negative, for the psychological, moral and social development of persons, the structure and functioning of societies, intercultural communications, and the perception and transmission of values, world views, ideologies, and religious beliefs. The spread of the Internet also raises a number of other ethical questions about matters like privacy, the security and confidentiality of data, copyright and intellectual property law, pornography, hate sites, the dissemination of rumor and character assassination under the guise of news, and much else. Already the Internet 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 became an arena of international conflict.

2. A number of concerns about the Internet are implicit in what has been said so far. One of the most important of these involves 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. Cyberspace ought to be a resource of comprehensive information and services available without charge 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. The Holy See strongly supports freedom of expression and the free exchange of ideas. Freedom to seek and know the truth is a fundamental human right. 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. 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. Among the specific problems presented by the Internet is the presence of hate sites devoted to defaming and attacking religious and ethnic groups. Some of these target the Catholic Church, Christian faith and morality. Like pornography and violence in the media, Internet hate sites are reflections of the dark side of human nature. And while respect for free expression may require tolerating even voices of hatred up to a point, industry self-regulation—and, where required, intervention by public authority—should establish and enforce reasonable limits to what can be said. Criminal behavior in other contexts is criminal behavior in cyberspace, and the civil authorities have a duty and a right to enforce such laws. New regulations also may be needed to deal with special Internet crimes like the dissemination of computer viruses, the theft of personal data stored on hard disks, and the like.

5. Regulation of the Internet is desirable, and in principle industry self-regulation is best. For the Holy See, the solution to problems arising from unregulated commercialization and privatization does not lie in state control of media, but in more regulation according to criteria of public service and in greater public accountability. Industry codes of ethics can play a useful role, provided they are seriously intended, involve representatives of the public, including from religious communities, in their formulation and enforcement, and, along with giving

encouragement to responsible communicators, carry appropriate penalties for violations, including public censure.

**6.** The Internet's transnational, boundary-bridging character and its role in globalization require international cooperation in setting standards and establishing mechanisms to promote and protect the international common good. The Internet can make an enormously valuable contribution to human life. It can foster prosperity and peace, intellectual and aesthetic growth, mutual understanding among peoples and nations on a global scale.

Thank you, Mister Chairperson!