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Media and Youth: The Protection of Minors

A Call for Media Education

1. The Church and the new media environment

Access and choice for users of both the “old media” – television, radio and the press – and the “new media” – Internet and other forms of information technology – have grown at an extraordinary rate in recent years. At the same time, the distinction between advertising, entertainment and information has often become blurred, and the globalisation of the media has made it increasingly difficult to monitor, let alone control, content and distribution.

This new media environment provides great opportunities for society but also poses *challenges of a societal and ethical nature* for us as citizens and as Christians. Pope John Paul II said recently that “the Church cannot be a mere spectator of the social results of technological advances which have such decisive effects on people’s lives”¹. We bear a special responsibility for children and young people: not only to protect them from exploitative methods of communication or from content that is harmful to their development, but also to enable them to use the media – especially the new media – constructively for the common good of society.

2. The European Union and the protection of minors

The Swedish Government has pledged that during its Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2001, “the situation of children and young people in the new media landscape will be highlighted”. COMECE (the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community) welcomes this initiative and looks forward in particular to the conclusions to be drawn by the Council of Ministers of Culture at their meeting in Luxembourg on 21 June 2001.

COMECE also looks forward to the review of the *Television Without Frontiers* directive by the European Commission in early 2002 and to the process of consultations and workshops to be held in the course of 2001 in preparation for this review.

In the context of these important upcoming developments in European Union policy, COMECE would like to outline some *basic principles concerning the situation of children and young people in the new media environment* and to emphasise the importance of *media education*.

On 24 September 1998 the Council adopted a Recommendation to Member States concerning the *Protection of Minors and Human Dignity in Audio-visual and Information Services*. On 27 February 2001 the Commission published an Evaluation Report on the application of the Recommendation and the measures adopted in the Member States and at Community level over the past two years².

The Commission's Report concluded that, although the Recommendation has been satisfactorily implemented overall, "consumers have not been sufficiently involved in the introduction of codes of conduct". One very important way of involving consumers – we think it would be better to refer to "citizens" – is education. Unfortunately, both the Recommendation and the Report seem to pay only superficial attention to it.

3. The importance of media education

We emphasise that media producers bear the primary responsibility for ensuring that children and young people are not exploited by the media or exposed to content that may be harmful to their development. The state also has a duty to monitor the behaviour of media producers and hold them to account.

However, bans, censorship, "watersheds", regulation and codes of conducts are effective only to a certain extent. This point was made by Viviane Reding, the European Commissioner for Education, Culture and the Media during a meeting with the COMECE Working Group on Information Society, Communications and Media Policy in January 2001. Such measures must be implemented in parallel with education. Unfortunately, despite the Commission's repeated calls for fostering both self-regulation and education in the critical use of the media, we note that in the whole Evaluation Report only one sentence deals with education³.

Whilst admitting the importance of maintaining and further implementing regulatory and self-regulatory measures, we believe that one of the best and most lasting forms of "protection" is to provide children with the *skills and understanding to interact critically with the media*. Media education is the key means to foster not simply young people's critical understanding of the media

through analysis but also their critical participation as cultural producers in their own right. It is essential to equip them to become actively involved in the media culture that surrounds them. In this sense, media education can develop children's own ability to protect themselves from – and, more importantly and positively, to understand and to deal effectively with – the broader media environment. Parents have a special responsibility to encourage and enable their children to adopt this critical approach to the media.

We also note that public service broadcasters play an important role not only in preserving the quality and plurality of the media, but also in giving people the education and opportunity to use the media in their own interest. We hope that policy-makers will recall this fact when reflecting on the future of public service broadcasting in the European Union. We also encourage them to consider carefully the role of “public space” on the Internet.

Special attention must be given to *Internet literacy*. In this context, we welcome the *e-Learning Action Plan* adopted by the European Commission on 28 March 2001, in particular Commissioner Reding's intention to work on an initiative on education in the visual image and the new media. Nevertheless, we wish to underline that measures designed to train people in the use of information technology – such as the targets set by the Lisbon process and confirmed by the European Council in Stockholm on 23-24 March – are not enough. Provisions must be made at all levels and in all sectors of education and learning to equip people with the skills to use and evaluate the *content of the Internet* as well as its technical apparatus.

4. Lifelong learning for citizenship and democracy

Media education is not only about acquiring a personal critical attitude. It also serves the common good of society as a whole. It is an *education for citizenship and democracy*. It can contribute to the formation of well-informed citizens who can “take control”, become effective agents for change, make rational decisions (often on the basis of media evidence), and fully participate in public life at local, national and European level. If, as we know, the struggle for citizenship and democracy is partly fought over cultural meanings and expressions – and particularly over those offered by the media – media education represents a very significant contribution to the future development of citizenship and democracy.

Given also that for most children interest and attachment to media develops well before they start attending school and continues throughout their adulthood, we can conclude that *media education is a lifelong process*. It is therefore essential to promote media education at the different stages of adult life. We should think about the possibility of forms of media education that go

beyond the traditional classroom. These will include new ways of dialogue and common experience between adults (parents, teachers, religious people, etc.) and children, and between media producers, policy-makers (at local, national and European level) and audiences. They will also include new institutional provisions (both private and public) for the different sectors of society with the opportunity for access to and participation in a whole range of “old” and “new” media and the media education activities associated with them. The work of the European Commission on *e-Learning* and lifelong learning is a chance to turn these possibilities into reality.

5. The need for a deeper debate

At the heart of the issue is a broader understanding of education about culture and communication. The processes that have been initiated by the Swedish Presidency of the European Union and the European Commission provide an opportunity for our educational and media policy-makers across the European Union and the candidate countries to begin a serious reflection on these issues. In this light, the Plenary Meeting of COMECE requests the COMECE Working Group on Information Society, Communications and Media Policy to engage actively in the preparatory process for the review of the *Television Without Frontiers* directive and in the wider debate launched by the Swedish Presidency.

Rome, 30 March 2001

The Bishops of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community:

Mgr Josef Homeyer, Bishop of Hildesheim (Germany) – President of COMECE

Mgr Teodoro De Faria, Bishop of Funchal (Portugal)

Mgr Luk De Hovre, Auxiliary Bishop of Mechelen-Brussels (Belgium)

Mgr Joseph Duffy, Bishop of Clogher (Ireland)

Mgr Fernand Franck, Archbishop of Luxembourg

Mgr Crispian Hollis, Bishop of Portsmouth (England and Wales)

Mgr Egon Kapellari, Bishop of Graz-Seckau (Austria)

Mgr William Kenney, Auxiliary Bishop of Stockholm (Sweden)

Mgr John Mone, Bishop of Paisley (Scotland)

Mgr Attilio Nicora, Italian Bishops' Conference

Mgr Hippolyte Simon, Bishop of Clermont (France)

Mgr Adrianus van Luyn, Bishop of Rotterdam (Netherlands)

Mgr Antonios Varthalitis, Archbishop of Corfu (Greece)

Mgr Elias Yanes Alvarez, Archbishop of Saragossa (Spain)

¹ *Address to the plenary meeting of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 16 March 2001.*

² *The Evaluation Report stated that, as requested in the Recommendation, self-regulation and codes of conduct have been adopted by Internet operators in most Member States. The industry is also committed to developing rating and filtering systems as well as requiring guarantees from operators on the quality of the sites to which they give access. As for broadcasting services (radio and television), the Report says that all Member States have made arrangements for programmes that might be harmful to minors to be preceded by an acoustic warning or visual symbol. Moreover, following a “Study on Parental Control of Television Broadcasting” carried out by Oxford University for the Commission in 1999, the European Parliament adopted a resolution (European Parliament Report A5-0258/2000, 19 September 2000, and Resolution R5-0440/2000, 5 October 2000, drafted by Roberta Angelilli MEP) advocating, inter alia, the general availability to all families of television filtering devices at an affordable price and the requirement that all broadcasters in the EU agree to a code of self-regulation on the protection of minors. The COMECE Working Group on Information Society, Communications and Media Policy wrote to the members of the European Parliament Committee on Culture, Education and the Media in May 2000 to express support for Ms Angelilli’s report and to emphasise the importance of media education.*

³ *Commission Evaluation Report (COM(2001) 106), 27 February 2001, section 3.1.3: “Several members states have stressed the importance of schools as the appropriate place for educational measures.”*