

Ethics in Internet

22 February 2002

I. Introduction

1. “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.”¹

The truth of these words has become clearer than ever during the past decade. Today it takes no great stretch of the imagination to envisage the earth as an interconnected globe humming with electronic transmissions—a chattering planet nestled in the provident silence of space. The ethical question is whether this is contributing to authentic human development and helping individuals and peoples to be true to their transcendent destiny.

¹ Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Pastoral Instruction *Aetatis Novae* on Social Communications on the twentieth anniversary of *Communio et progressio*, n. 4.

And, of course, in many ways the answer is yes. The new media are powerful tools for education and cultural enrichment, for commercial activity and political participation, for intercultural dialogue and understanding; and, as we point out in the document that accompanies this one,² they also can serve the cause of religion. Yet this coin has another side. Media of communication that can be used for the good of persons and communities can be used to exploit, manipulate, dominate, and corrupt.

2. The Internet is the latest and in many respects most powerful in a line of media—telegraph, telephone, radio, television—that for many people have progressively eliminated time and space as obstacles to communication during the last century and a half. It has enormous consequences for individuals, nations, and the world.

In this document we wish to set out a Catholic view of the Internet, as a starting point for the Church’s participation in dialogue with other sectors of society, especially other religious groups, concerning the development and use of this marvelous technological instrument. The Internet is being put to many good uses now, with the promise of many more, but much

² Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *The Church and Internet*.

harm also can be done by its improper use. Which it will be, good or harm, is largely a matter of choice—a choice to whose making the Church brings two elements of great importance: her commitment to the dignity of the human person and her long tradition of moral wisdom.³

3. As with other media, the person and the community of persons are central to ethical evaluation of the Internet. In regard to the message communicated, the process of communicating, and structural and systemic issues in communication, “the fundamental ethical principle is this: The human person and the human community are the end and measure of the use of the media of social communication; communication should be by persons to persons for the integral development of persons.”⁴

The common good—“the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily”⁵—provides a second basic principle for ethical evaluation of social communications. It should be understood inclusively, as the whole of those worthy purposes to which a community’s members commit themselves together and which the community exists to realize and sustain. The good of individuals depends upon the common good of their communities.

³ Cf. Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Communications*, n. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 21.

⁵ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, n. 26; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1906.

The virtue disposing people to protect and promote the common good is solidarity. It is not a feeling of “vague compassion or shallow distress” at other people’s troubles, but “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.”⁶ Especially today solidarity has a clear, strong international dimension; it is correct to speak of, and obligatory to work for, the international common good.

4. The international common good, the virtue of solidarity, the revolution in communications media and information technology, and the Internet are all relevant to the process of globalization.

To a great extent, the new technology drives and supports globalization, creating a situation in which “commerce and communications are no longer bound by borders.”⁷ This has immensely important consequences. Globalization can increase wealth and foster development; it offers advantages like “efficiency and increased production... greater unity among peoples... a better service to the human family.”⁸ But the benefits have not been evenly shared up to now. Some individuals, commercial enterprises, and countries have grown enormously wealthy while others have fallen behind. Whole nations have been excluded almost entirely from the

⁶ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 38.

⁷ John Paul II, *Address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences*, n. 2, April 27, 2001.

⁸ John Paul II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in America*, n. 20.

process, denied a place in the new world taking shape. “Globalization, which has profoundly transformed economic systems by creating unexpected possibilities of growth, has also resulted in many people being relegated to the side of the road: unemployment in the more developed countries and extreme poverty in too many countries of the Southern Hemisphere continue to hold millions of women and men back from progress and prosperity.”⁹

It is by no means clear that even societies that have entered into the globalization process have done so entirely as a matter of free, informed choice. Instead, “many people, especially the disadvantaged, experience this as something that has been forced upon them rather than as a process in which they can actively participate.”¹⁰

In many parts of the world, globalization is spurring rapid, sweeping social change. This is not just an economic process but a cultural one, with both positive and negative aspects. “Those who are subjected to it often see globalization as a destructive flood threatening the social norms which had protected them and the cultural points of reference which had given them direction in life....Changes in technology and work relationships are moving too quickly for cultures to respond.”¹¹

5. One major consequence of the deregulation of recent years has been a

⁹ John Paul II, Address to the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See, n. 3, January 10, 2000.

¹⁰ Address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, n. 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, n. 3.

shift of power from national states to transnational corporations. It is important that these corporations be encouraged and helped to use their power for the good of humanity; and this points to a need for more communication and dialogue between them and concerned bodies like the Church.

Use of the new information technology and the Internet needs to be informed and guided by a resolute commitment to the practice of solidarity in the service of the common good, within and among nations. This technology can be a means for solving human problems, promoting the integral development of persons, creating a world governed by justice and peace and love. Now, even more than when the Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communications *Communio et Progressio* made the point more than thirty years ago, media have the ability to make every person everywhere “a partner in the business of the human race.”¹²

This is an astonishing vision. The Internet can help make it real—for individuals, groups, nations, and the human race—only if it is used in light of clear, sound ethical principles, especially the virtue of solidarity. To do so will be to everyone’s advantage, for “we know one thing today more than in the past: we will never be happy and at peace without one another, much less if some are against others.”¹³ This will be an expression of that spirituality of

¹² Pontifical Commission for Social Communications, Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication, *Communio et progressio*, n. 19.

¹³ Address to the Diplomatic Corps, n. 4.

communion which implies “the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God,” along with the ability “to ‘make room’ for our brothers and sisters, bearing ‘each other’s burdens’ (Gal. 6, 2) and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us.”¹⁴

6. 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. We shall speak briefly about some of these things below, while recognizing that they call for continued analysis and discussion by all concerned parties. Fundamentally, though, we do not view the Internet only as a source of problems; we see it as a source of benefits to the human race. But the benefits can be fully realized only if the problems are solved.

II. About the Internet

7. The Internet has a number of striking features. It is instantaneous, immediate, worldwide, decentralized, interactive, endlessly expandable in contents and outreach, flexible and adaptable to a remarkable degree. It is egalitarian, in the sense that anyone with the necessary equipment and modest technical skill can be an active presence in cyberspace, declare his or her message to the world, and demand a hearing. It allows

¹⁴ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 43.

individuals to indulge in anonymity, role-playing, and fantasizing and also to enter into community with others and engage in sharing. According to users’ tastes, it lends itself equally well to active participation and to passive absorption into “a narcissistic, self-referential world of stimuli with near-narcotic effects.”¹⁵ It can be used to break down the isolation of individuals and groups or to deepen it.

8. The technological configuration underlying the Internet has a considerable bearing on its ethical aspects: People have tended to use it according to the way it was designed, and to design it to suit that kind of use. This ‘new’ system in fact dates back to the cold war years of the 1960s, when it was intended to foil nuclear attack by creating a decentralized network of computers holding vital data. Decentralization was the key to the scheme, since in this way, so it was reasoned, the loss of one or even many computers would not mean the loss of the data.

An idealistic vision of the free exchange of information and ideas has played a praiseworthy part in the development of the Internet. Yet its decentralized configuration and the similarly decentralized design of the World Wide Web of the late 1980s also proved to be congenial to a mindset opposed to anything smacking of legitimate regulation for public responsibility. An exaggerated individualism regarding the Internet thus emerged. Here, it was said, was a new realm, the marvelous land of

¹⁵ *Ethics in Communications*, n. 2.

cyberspace, where every sort of expression was allowed and the only law was total individual liberty to do as one pleased. Of course this meant that the only community whose rights and interests would be truly recognized in cyberspace was the community of radical libertarians. This way of thinking remains influential in some circles, supported by familiar libertarian arguments also used to defend pornography and violence in the media generally.¹⁶

Although radical individualists and entrepreneurs obviously are two very different groups, there is a convergence of interests between those who want the Internet to be a place for very nearly every kind of expression, no matter how vile and destructive, and those who want it to be a vehicle of untrammelled commercial activity on a neo-liberal model that “considers profit and the law of the market as its only parameters, to the detriment of the dignity of and the respect due to individuals and peoples.”¹⁷

9. The explosion of information technology has increased the communication capabilities of some favored individuals and groups many times over. 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. “The free flow of images and speech on a global scale is transforming not only political and economic relations between peoples, but even our understanding of the world. It opens up a range of hitherto unthinkable possibilities.”¹⁸ When based upon shared values rooted in the nature of the person, the intercultural dialogue made possible by the Internet and other media of social communication can be “a privileged means for building the civilization of love.”¹⁹

But that is not the whole story. “Paradoxically, the very forces which can lead to better communication can also lead to increasing self-centeredness and alienation.”²⁰ 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 reverted to its origins in the cold war and became an arena of international conflict.

¹⁸ Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace 2001, n. 11.

¹⁹ Ibid., n. 16.

²⁰ John Paul II, Message for the 33rd World Communications Day, n. 4, January 24, 1999.

¹⁶ Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Pornography and Violence in the Communications Media: A Pastoral Response, n. 20.

¹⁷ Ecclesia in America, n. 56.

III. Some Areas of Concern

10. 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. In this sense it is an updated version of an older gap between the ‘information rich’ and ‘information poor.’

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. It is imperative “that the gap between the beneficiaries of the new means of information and expression and those who do not have access to them...not become another intractable source of inequity and discrimination.”²¹

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 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.

²¹ John Paul II, Message for the 31st World Day of Communications, 1997.

As the new global economy takes shape, the Church is concerned “that the winner in this process will be humanity as a whole” and not just “a wealthy elite that controls science, technology and the planet’s resources”; this is to say that the Church desires “a globalization which will be at the service of the whole person and of all people.”²²

In this connection it should be borne in mind that the causes and consequences of the divide are not only economic but also technical, social, and cultural. So, for example, another Internet ‘divide’ operates to the disadvantage of women, and it, too, needs to be closed.

11. We are particularly concerned about the cultural dimensions of what is now taking place. Precisely as powerful tools of the globalization process, the new information technology and the Internet transmit and help instill a set of cultural values—ways of thinking about social relationships, family, religion, the human condition—whose novelty and glamour can challenge and overwhelm traditional cultures.

Intercultural dialogue and enrichment are of course highly desirable. Indeed, “dialogue between cultures is especially needed today because of the impact of new communications technology on the lives of individuals and peoples.”²³ But this has to be a two-way street. Cultures have much to learn from one another, and merely imposing the world view, values, and even language of one culture

²² Address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, n. 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, n. 11.

upon another is not dialogue but cultural imperialism.

Cultural domination is an especially serious problem when a dominant culture carries false values inimical to the true good of individuals and groups. As matters stand, the Internet, along with the other media of social communication, is transmitting the value-laden message of Western secular culture to people and societies in many cases ill-prepared to evaluate and cope with it. Many serious problems result—for example, in regard to marriage and family life, which are experiencing “a radical and widespread crisis”²⁴ in many parts of the world.

Cultural sensitivity and respect for other people’s values and beliefs are imperative in these circumstances. Intercultural dialogue that “protects the distinctiveness of cultures as historical and creative expressions of the underlying unity of the human family, and...sustains understanding and communion between them”²⁵ is needed to build and maintain the sense of international solidarity.

12. The question of freedom of expression on the Internet is similarly complex and gives rise to another set of concerns.

We strongly support freedom of expression and the free exchange of ideas. Freedom to seek and know the truth is a fundamental human right,²⁶ and freedom of expression is a cornerstone of democracy. “Man, provided he respects the moral order and the common interest,

is entitled to seek after truth, express and make known his opinions...he ought to be truthfully informed about matters of public interest.”²⁷ And public opinion, “an essential expression of human nature organized in society,” absolutely requires “freedom to express ideas and attitudes.”²⁸

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.

13. In this new environment, journalism is undergoing profound changes. The combination of new technologies and globalization has “increased the powers of the media, but has also made them more liable to ideological and commercial pressures,”²⁹ and this is true of journalism as well.

The Internet is a highly effective instrument for bringing news and

²⁴ *Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 47.

²⁵ *Message for the World Day of Peace 2001*, n. 10.

²⁶ *John Paul II, Centesimus annus*, n. 47.

²⁷ *Gaudium et spes*, n. 59.

²⁸ *Communio et progressio*, nn. 25, 26.

²⁹ *John Paul II, Address to the Jubilee of Journalists*, n. 2, June 4, 2000.

information rapidly to people. But the economic competitiveness and round-the-clock nature of Internet journalism also contribute to sensationalism and rumor-mongering, to a merging of news, advertising, and entertainment, and to an apparent decline in serious reporting and commentary. Honest journalism is essential to the common good of nations and the international community. Problems now visible in the practice of journalism on the Internet call for speedy correcting by journalists themselves.

The sheer overwhelming quantity of information on the Internet, much of it unevaluated as to accuracy and relevance, is a problem for many. But we also are concerned lest people make use of the medium's technological capacity for customizing information simply to raise electronic barriers against unfamiliar ideas. That would be an unhealthy development in a pluralistic world where people need to grow in mutual understanding. While Internet users have a duty to be selective and self-disciplined, that should not be carried to the extreme of walling themselves off from others. The medium's implications for psychological development and health likewise need continued study, including the possibility that prolonged immersion in the virtual world of cyberspace may be damaging to some. Although there are many advantages in the capacity technology gives people to "assemble packages of information and services uniquely designed for them," this also "raises an inescapable question: Will the audience of the future be a multitude of audiences of one?...What

would become of solidarity—what would become of love—in a world like that?"³⁰

14. Standing alongside issues that have to do with freedom of expression, the integrity and accuracy of news, and the sharing of ideas and information, is another set of concerns generated by libertarianism. The ideology of radical libertarianism is both mistaken and harmful—not least, to legitimate free expression in the service of truth. The error lies in exalting freedom "to such an extent that it becomes an absolute, which would then be the source of values....In this way the inescapable claims of truth disappear, yielding their place to a criterion of sincerity, authenticity and 'being at peace with oneself.'"³¹ There is no room for authentic community, the common good, and solidarity in this way of thinking.

IV. Recommendations and Conclusion

15. As we have seen, the virtue of solidarity is the measure of the Internet's service of the common good. It is the common good that supplies the context for considering the ethical question: "Are the media being used for good or evil?"³²

Many individuals and groups share responsibility in this matter—for example, the transnational corporations of which we spoke above. All users of the Internet are obliged to use it in an informed, disciplined way, for morally good purposes; parents should guide and

³⁰ Ethics in Communications, n. 29.

³¹ John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor*, n. 32.

³² Ethics in Communications, n. 1.

supervise children's use.³³ Schools and other educational institutions and programs for children and adults should provide training in discerning use of the Internet as part of a comprehensive media education including not just training in technical skills—'computer literacy' and the like—but a capacity for informed, discerning evaluation of content. Those whose decisions and actions contribute to shaping the structure and contents of the Internet have an especially serious duty to practice solidarity in the service of the common good.

16. Prior censorship by government should be avoided; "censorship...should only be used in the very last extremity."³⁴ But the Internet is no more exempt than other media from reasonable laws against hate speech, libel, fraud, child pornography and pornography in general, and other offenses. 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.

Regulation of the Internet is desirable, and in principle industry self-regulation is best. "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

³³ Cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, n. 76.

³⁴ *Communio et progressio*, n. 86.

in greater public accountability."³⁵ Industry codes of ethics can play a useful role, provided they are seriously intended, involve representatives of the public in their formulation and enforcement, and, along with giving encouragement to responsible communicators, carry appropriate penalties for violations, including public censure.³⁶ Circumstances sometimes may require state intervention: for example, by setting up media advisory boards representing the range of opinion in the community.³⁷

17. 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.³⁸ In regard to media technology, as in regard to much else, "there is a pressing need for equity at the international level."³⁹ Determined action in the private and public sectors is needed to close and eventually eliminate the digital divide.

Many difficult Internet-related questions call for international consensus: for example, how to guarantee the privacy of law-abiding individuals and groups without keeping law enforcement and security officials from exercising surveillance over criminals and terrorists; how to protect copyright and intellectual property rights without limiting access to

³⁵ *Aetatis Novae*, n. 5.

³⁶ Cf. *Communio et progressio*, n. 79.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, n. 88.

³⁸ Cf. Address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, n. 2.

³⁹ *Ethics in Communications*, n. 22.

material in the public domain-and how to define the 'public domain' itself; how to establish and maintain broad-based Internet repositories of information freely available to all Internet users in a variety of languages; how to protect women's rights in regard to Internet access and other aspects of the new information technology. In particular, the question of how to close the digital divide between the information rich and the information poor requires urgent attention in its technical, educational, and cultural aspects.

There is today a "growing sense of international solidarity" that offers the United Nations system in particular "a unique opportunity to contribute to the globalization of solidarity by serving as a meeting place for states and civil society and as a convergence of the varied interests and needs...Cooperation between international agencies and nongovernmental organizations will help to ensure that the interests of states—legitimate though they may be—and of the different groups within them, will not be invoked or defended at the expense of the interests or rights of other peoples, especially the less fortunate."⁴⁰ In this connection we hope that the World Summit of the Information Society scheduled to take place in 2003 will make a positive contribution to the discussion of these matters.

18. As we pointed out above, a companion document to this one called *The Church and Internet* speaks

⁴⁰ John Paul II, Address to the UN Secretary General and to the Administrative Committee on Coordination of the United Nations, nn. 2, 3, April 7, 2000.

specifically about the Church's use of the Internet and the Internet's role in the life of the Church. Here we wish only to emphasize that the Catholic Church, along with other religious bodies, should have a visible, active presence on the Internet and be a partner in the public dialogue about its development. "The Church does not presume to dictate these decisions and choices, but it does seek to be of help by indicating ethical and moral criteria which are relevant to the process—criteria which are to be found in both human and Christian values."⁴¹

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.

It also can help men and women in their age-old search for self-understanding. In every age, including our own, people ask the same fundamental questions: "Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?"⁴² The Church cannot impose answers, but she can—and must—proclaim to the world the answers she has received; and today, as always, she offers the one ultimately satisfying answer to the deepest questions of life—Jesus Christ, who "fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling."⁴³ Like today's world itself, the world of media, including the Internet, has been brought by Christ, inchoately yet truly, within the

⁴¹ *Aetatis Novae*, n. 12.

⁴² John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio*, n. 1.

⁴³ *Gaudium et spes*, n. 22.

boundaries of the kingdom of God and placed in service to the word of salvation. Yet “far from diminishing our concern to develop this earth, the expectancy of a new earth should spur us on, for it is here that the body of a new human family grows, foreshadowing in some way the age which is to come.”⁴⁴

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Feast of the Chair of St. Peter the Apostle.*

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President*

*Pierfranco Pastore
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⁴⁴ Ibid., n. 39.