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The people's communication charter

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The People's Communication Charter

An International Covenant of Standards and Rights

The cultural environment is vital to our common future. Yet, it is currently pervaded by world-wide governmental and commercial censorship, distorted and misleading information, stereotyped and damaging images of the human condition (including gender, age, race, ethnicity, sexuality, physical and mental illness and disability), restricted access to knowledge, and insufficient channels to communicate diverse ideas and opinions. The reality of the cultural environment reduces the capacity of ordinary women and men to control decisions about their lives and about the socialization of their children. It is time, therefore, for individual citizens and their organizations to take an active role in the shaping of the cultural environment into which all children are born and in which all people live and learn.

For these reasons, the World Association for Christian Communication wishes to join with the Centre for Communication and Human Rights (Netherlands), Third World Network (Malaysia), the Cultural Environment Movement (USA), and AMARC (Peru/Canada) to endorse and promote a People's Communication Charter.

The Charter aims to bring to cultural policy-making a set of standards that represents rights and responsibilities to be observed in all democratic countries and in international law.

PREAMBLE

We, the Signatories of this Charter, recognize that:

- Communication is basic to the life of all individuals and their communities.
- All people are entitled to participate in communication, and in making decisions about communication within and between societies.

- The majority of the world's people lack even the minimal technological resources for survival and communication, and, unless resources are re-allocated, new communication technologies tend to further widen the gap between the rich and the poor.

- In a growing number of countries, the concentration of commercial operators displaces public media, erodes the public sphere, and fails to provide for cultural and information needs, including the plurality of opinions and the diversity of cultural expressions and languages.

- Massive and pervasive media violence cultivates fear and mistrust, polarizes societies, exacerbates conflict, and makes people feel more vulnerable and dependent.

- Media employ stereotypes that misrepresent both women and men; young as well as old persons; whites as well as people of colour; racial, cultural and sexual majorities as well as minorities; the rich as well as the poor; people who are disabled and physically or mentally ill or so labelled; and many other marginalized and stigmatized groups.

Therefore, we assert that:

All people are entitled to access to the resources they need to communicate freely within and between their societies;

All people need to develop their own communication skills, channels, and institutions through which they can speak for themselves with dignity and respect, and tell their own stories; Provisions for all aspects of free, independent and secure communication and culture, and mechanisms for their implementation, must be strengthened.

DEFINITIONS

"Charter" means a set of guidelines that are voluntarily adopted by the Signatories and that are used as their common frame of reference on communication issues.

"Communication" refers to all interactive processes through which individuals and communities share opinions, information, feelings and ideas.

Information" is understood in a very broad sense and includes news as well as entertainment in all modes and media.

"Media" refers to publicly or privately owned means for the mass- dissemination of print or electronic communication.

"Cyberspace" refers to the virtual spaces that are facilitated through the use of computer-assisted telecommunications networks through which people establish new forms of information sharing and interaction.

STANDARDS

Article 1. Respect

People are entitled to be treated with respect and in accordance with the basic human rights and standards of dignity, integrity, identity, and non-discrimination.

Article 2. Freedom

People have the right to freedom of expression without interference by public or private interests, and to have communication channels independent of governmental or commercial control;

Article 3. Access

In order to exercise their rights, people should have fair and equitable access to local and global resources and facilities for conventional and advanced channels of communication. People also have the right to receive opinions, information and ideas in a language they normally use and understand; to receive a range of cultural products designed for a wide variety of tastes and interests; and to have easy access to facts about ownership and sources of information. Restrictions on access to information may be permissible only for a good and compelling reason, as when prescribed by international human rights standards or are necessary for the protection of a democratic society or the basic rights of others.

Article 4. Independence

The realization of people's right to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from the development of self-reliant communication structures requires national and international assistance. This includes support of development communication and of independent media; training programs for professional media workers; the establishment of independent, representative associations, syndicates or trade unions; and international co-operation in the upholding of these standards of policy making, regulation and management of media.

Article 5. Literacy

People have the right to acquire the skills necessary to participate fully in public communication. This requires literacy in reading, writing, and story-telling; in critical media awareness and literacy; in computer skills and education about the role of communication in society.

Article 6. Protection of journalists

Journalists must be accorded full protection of the law, including international humanitarian law, especially in areas of conflict. They

must have safe, unrestricted access to sources of information, and must be able to seek remedy, when required, through an international body.

Article 7. Right of reply and redress

People have the right of reply and to demand penalties for damage. Individuals concerned shall have an opportunity to correct, without undue delay, statements relating to them which they deem to be false and which they have a justified interest in having corrected. Such corrections should be given, as far as practical, the same prominence as the original expression. States should impose penalties for proven damage, or other remedies such as required corrections, where a court of law has determined that an information provider has wilfully disseminated inaccurate or misleading and damaging information, or has facilitated the dissemination of such information.

Article 8. Diversity of languages

People have the right to a diversity of languages. This includes the right to express themselves and have access to information in their own language, the right to use their languages in educational institutions funded by the state, and the right to have adequate provisions created for the use of minority languages where needed.

Article 9. Cultural identity

People have the right to protect their cultural identity. This includes respect for people's pursuit of cultural development and the right to free expression in languages they understand. People's right to the protection of their cultural space and heritage should not violate other human rights or provisions of this Charter.

Article 10. Participation in policy-making

People have the right to participate in public decision-making about the provision of information, the development and utilization of knowledge, the preservation, protection and development of culture, the choice and application of communication technologies, and the structure and policies of media industries.

Article 11. Children's rights

Children have the right to mass media products that are designed to meet their needs and interests, and foster their healthy physical, mental and emotional development. They should be protected from harmful media products and from commercial and any other exploitation at home, in school, and at places of play, work, or business. States should take the necessary steps to produce high quality cultural and entertainment materials for children widely available in their own languages.

Article 12. Cyberspace

People have a right to universal access to and equitable use of cyberspace. With the increasing importance of cyberspace for many social activities, people's rights to free and open communities in cyberspace, their freedom of electronic expression, and the protection of their privacy against electronic surveillance and intrusion should be secured.

Article 13. Privacy

Media should respect people's private, family and home life, physical and moral integrity, honour and reputation. They should avoid publishing allegations irrelevant to the public interest; unauthorized publication of private photographs or other private communication; and the disclosure of information given or received in confidence for health or other professional or religious reasons. However, states should take care that the protection of privacy does not unduly interfere with the freedom of expression or the administration of justice.

Article 14. Harm

Media should resist incitement to hate, prejudice, violence, and war. They should not present violence as a normal, "manly," and entertaining means of resolving conflict but show its true consequences and seek alternative solutions. Other violations of human dignity and integrity to be avoided include stereotypic images that distort the realities and complexities of people's lives. Media should not ridicule, stigmatize, or demonize people on the basis of gender, race, class, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, and physical or mental condition, or victimize other vulnerable groups.

Article 15. Justice

People have the right to demand that media respect standards of due process in the coverage of trials. This implies that media should not presume guilt before a verdict of guilt, or invade the privacy of defendants, and may report but should not televise criminal trials in real time while the trials are going on.

Article 16. Consumption

People have the right to demand useful and factual consumer information, and to be protected from misleading and distorted advertising, promotion disguised as news and entertainment (infomercials, product placement, children's programs that use franchised characters and toys, etc.), and from the promotion of wasteful, unnecessary, harmful or ecologically damaging goods and activities. Advertising directed at children should receive special scrutiny.

Article 17. Accountability

Media should establish mechanisms, including self-regulatory bodies, that account to the general public for their adherence to the standards established in this Charter.

Article 18. Implementation

In consultation with Signatories and others who support this Charter, national and international mechanisms will be organized to publicize and disseminate this Charter to the widest possible audience; to monitor and assess the performance of media in light of these Standards; to receive complaints about violations of the provisions of this Charter; to advise on adequate remedial measures; and to establish procedures for the periodic review, development and modification of this Charter.

SOURCES

Although this Charter reflects current interests and concerns of the Signatories, it has also been informed by and benefited from the following international agreements and declarations:

With regard to freedom of information: Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; UNESCO Resolutions 3.2. of 1983 and 4.1 of 1991 on the Right to Communicate; the provisions on information of the 1975 Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe; the 1991 UNESCO Declaration of Windhoek; and Article 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

With regard to the social responsibility of mass media: The 1978 UNESCO Declaration on Fundamental Principles Concerning the Contribution of the Mass Media to Strengthening Peace and International Understanding, to the Promotion of Human Rights and to Countering Racism, Apartheid and Incitement to War; Article 4 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; Article 5 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women by the Beijing Platform of Action of the 1995 UN World Conference on Women; and Article 17 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

With regard to the development of communication: The UN Declaration on the Right to Development of 1986; and the UNESCO Resolution 4.1 of 1991 statement on Communication for Development.

With regard to the protection of cultural and linguistic rights: Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and the 1966 UNESCO Declaration of the Principles of International Cultural Co-operation.

The People's Communication Charter is intended as a modest step towards a global movement to shape the cultural environment in accordance with people's needs and interests. Over the past few years several draft texts have circulated and we received a large number of suggestions for improvement. Please do not hesitate to join the movement and share your comments and ideas. The address for contributions to the revision of the Charter and suggestions about its implementation is: Centre for Communication & Human Rights, Burg. Hoguerstraat 279, 1064 CP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Tel: +31 20 4480460. E-mail: hamelink@antenna.nl