Media Division: Consultation on Media's Role in Promoting Democracy and Participation in Information Society

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On 19 December 2002, the Group of Specialists on on-line services and democracy of the Council of Europe published an outline position paper on the role of the media in promoting democracy and participation in the information society. The Group has invited European media professionals and other interested parties to comment on the document in order to collect information on what they perceive the changing role of the media to be and on how the media are responding to the changes.

The Group highlights five areas where the role of the media has changed. The first is informing the public about the activities of public authorities. The Group signals that more and more, this kind of information is directly available to the public on official web-sites. The importance of the role of the media has therefore changed from providing the public with this information to interpreting and highlighting the most important information.

The second area is the collection of the views of the public. Due to technological progress, the media can now collect the views of the public more directly than before, for example, by on-line voting. The Group would like to ascertain whether the media have guidelines on how to process and present the results of on-line voting.

Thirdly, due to new technologies, there are more possibilities for the public to engage in discussions about public affairs, for example in on-line chat sessions and discussion fora. This raises a number of questions, for example, whether participants should be allowed to conceal their identity; whether someone has been assigned responsibility for the content of the input by the public; whether there should be guidelines for participating in these debates and chat sessions and whether such on-line discussions should be moderated in certain circumstances (and if so, how).

The fourth area of attention is the promotion of democratic practices. In the information society, the media can publicise elections and encourage the public to participate in them. They can also suggest ways for public authorities to secure greater public involvement in their own activities.

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Finally, the Group points out that the media should be drawing attention to excluded sections of society. In the information society, people who do not have access to the Internet could be excluded from participation in societal affairs. It is an important role of the media to give consideration to the views of these people, their concerns and their general situation.

Outline position paper on the role of the media in promoting democracy and participation in the information society, Group of Specialists on on-line services and democracy (MM-S-OD), Council of Europe, 19 December 2002

http://www.humanrights.coe.int/media/documents/Media-and-e-governance(EN).doc

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