

Statement by Iceland's head of delegation

Ministerial session IV:

Ministerial dialogue including all stakeholders “Hate speech on-line”

Mister Chair, Ministers, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I have the honour to speak on behalf of Iceland on this First Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible of Media and Information Society. First of all I would like to send warm greetings to you all from my minister Mr Illugi Gunnarsson, who is today giving his speech on behalf of Iceland at the UNESCO General Conference in Paris. I would also like to thank Serbia for the warm welcome and an excellent organization of this conference.

The first ministerial conference on media and new communications was held in Reykjavik in 2009 under the subtheme – New Notion of Media. This theme is still paramount because we are still facing new challenges due to the constant developments of media and communication services in the information society.

Information and digital communication technology have had great influence on contemporary culture; both in terms of entertainment, creativity, communication, research and preservation of any cultural material. The Internet has therefore enriched our society with access to uncountable number of information and variation of platforms to communicate and express ourselves in public.

This has created both opportunities and challenges for policy makers.

In recent years, Iceland has focused on the general aim to make telecommunication accessible, effective and affordable. In addition, special emphasis has been put on to increase ICT knowledge in all age groups. The outcome is that Iceland has become a networked country where public access and use of the Internet is one of the highest in the world.

While the focus has primarily been on technical aspects of the Internet and accessibility, we have come to realise that it is essential to enhance knowledge and skills of the users of the Internet, their understanding of its nature and the role of media in a democratic societies, and, most importantly, how they can use this vast world changing platform to engage in constructive discussions, which are essential for democracy. It is our responsibility and mission to promote these values in order to encourage the further development of information society.

As the platform to participate in this public discussion has been made available to all of us and takes place in our homes behind locked doors, we, as persons and the society as whole, are facing unprecedented risks regarding how to handle this new power. We have been granted the tools, but not the skills or the know-how to use them. It is an important obligation of every government, which believes in the importance of public discussion, to enhance the skills of its citizens in this new environment. This obligation is important as ever in regards to children and young adults.

As we are all familiar with, there is an overwhelming amount of one sided, biased, or simply wrong, information in the media. On the Internet such information can even travel faster and gain more coverage than information based on research and liable sources. The majority of the public neither questions this information or its sources nor do people really know who are the interested parties generating them, for whatever reasons there may be. This pattern must be changed and specifically in cases where the information in question is targeted at the endorsement of violence against individuals or groups as the solution to social or political conflicts. Iceland believes it to be extremely important as democracy literally depends on the awareness and open dialogue of the public.

However, there is no one or simple solution to this problem, which in fact raises many questions; Is it really possible to teach people the difference between reliable information and propaganda? Is it important that the majority of people really know how to distinguish trustworthy information from biased or plain misleading information?

Enhancing media literacy is of course an essential part of this process. As media laws have traditionally been dealt with at the national level where different issues and cultural emphasis have been taken into account in each country – the legal definition concerning “hate speech” at international level is still very

vague. Hate speech laws represent more a symbolic strike against racism and certainly are very short of a solution.

I thank you for your attention.