GROUP 4
THE POTENTIAL OF THE TECHNOLOGY

The participants in the workshop on the technology's potential to protect and promote human rights recognize the opportunities that the technology and the Internet offer for transforming the global human rights environment. However, they indicated that, paradoxically, this same technology can be used harmfully to violate the human rights of freedom of expression and privacy. The participants therefore emphasized the need for human rights activists to be adequately informed of the potential and risks resulting from use of these new technologies. That way, they could maximize support for human rights and minimize the risks associated with the spread of the technology.

The participants highlighted their concerns and opposition to the tendency of governments to want to control certain aspects of these technologies, which are very useful tools for promoting human rights. The participants are particularly concerned about the desire of many governments to want to control both the content of the information disseminated on the Internet and the software that ensures the anonymity of exchanges (level of encoding).

The participants emphasized the fact that, if governments in Western democracies often appear guilty of violating human rights, especially the right to privacy and freedom of expression, then governments in less democratic countries will use all infringements of the principle of freedom of expression on the Internet as excuses to strictly control how citizens use the system. From this perspective, the idea of balancing various interests could quickly lead to harmful results. One participant suggested that Internet regulation follow the example of networks freely developing on the Internet, thereby allowing an arbitration environment to develop without the imposition of national or international laws.

The participants also highlighted the fact that human rights advocacy groups are often excluded from international forums during which the issues of regulations and standards for the new technologies are discussed. In certain cases, this exclusion is imposed by governments, but it is also because these groups lack technical knowledge on these subjects. The presence of these advocacy groups at these forums would make policy choices affecting human rights stand out. Usually, these policy choices are made, either consciously or not, by the developers of software and hardware used to access the Internet, and are not made public. This situation then leads to a sort of code tyranny.