Europe's way to the information society: an action plan

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Given the convergence of the telecommunications, audiovisual and publishing sectors, the question of media concentration should be regulated before there was any further move in the direction of liberalisation. Adoption of the Commission's proposal for a programme to liberalise services and infrastructure should depend on certain pre-conditions first being fulfilled in such fields as: * the establishment of a stable and legal regulatory framework, particularly with regard to: - media concentration and ownership; - the definition and preservation of the concept of universal service; - privacy; - intellectual property rights; - legal protection and security; - the audiovisual sector: ethical considerations; information; culture; - standardisation, interoperability; - tariffs (equalisation, cross-subsidisation); * the harmonisation and development of EURO-ISDN, an integrated broadband network, and IDA so as not to compromise the development of public interest and other applications. The ESC believed that an immediate start should be made on analyses of the social and economic risks and challenges involved in the transition to the information society and on measures to obviate and limit such risks. In particular, it called for: - the immediate establishment of a Group of Experts, which would include all social and economic interests; - studies to evaluate the investment needed to set up and operate information highways and new services, and to assess the effect on employment; - studies of the structural impact and effect on employment of new information and communication services, with particular regard to possible new applications in banks, commercial enterprises, mail-order firms, travel agents, transport firms and enterprises in the media industry; - the development and testing of rules governing layout and security in connection with the regional pilot projects. The findings of the studies, and the lessons learnt from the projects, should be made public and applied when further measures were drawn up to ease the transition to the information society. The findings and experiences should also be submitted to the European institutions and to all social and economic interests for their opinions, before final decisions were taken on appropriate measures. At the same time as getting to grips with the social consequences of the new technologies, there was also a case for studying needs so that the information society could satisfy the real demands of European society and not merely supply services that offered immediate financial gain. A detailed timetable should be fixed for debating these crucial questions in advance of the proposed deadlines for the liberalisation of all services whilst the deadlines in question should be adjusted in the light of the studies that needed to be carried out into the social implications. In view of the uncertainties surrounding current changes, governments and civil society should be allowed a reasonable length of time for reflection and the possible endorsement of a democratic regulatory body at Community level. The ESC emphasised that it might itself have a democratic role to play in such a body. It stressed that it was necessary for Member States to ensure that the decisions adopted by collective agreement at EU level were implemented at national level. The way in which the transition to the information society was organised was of great importance to the further economic and social modernisation of Europe and would play a decisive role in helping to safeguard and strengthen European firms' ability to innovate, determine future production and employment, and further develop working and living conditions. In the view of the ESC, it was necessary: 1. to use industrial, research, technological and training policy measures to further corporate restructuring and satisfy new skill requirements. Measures adopted under the current Fourth Framework Programme, as well as Structural Fund support programmes (particularly Objective 4), should be problem-oriented. 2. to make sure that, when setting up and operating new communication and information networks (information highways), attention was focused not only on technical and economic aspects but also on: - ensuring that the public had access to basic information services and that there was no discrimination regarding access to new systems and services, - ensuring sufficient diversity of information, - making allowance for the special protection that cultural and democratic values should enjoy,- guaranteeing the confidentiality of personal data and information security and preventing the

misuse of economic power for political ends. For these reasons there was a case for adopting ‘traffic rules’ for information highways. The prerequisite for this was the existence of a basic information and communications service to which all citizens had access. 3. to ease the transition to the information society of the future by creating new areas of potential demand. This would involve the development and operation of new information and communication systems and services that tapped the interests of society at large and served employment, social and environmental policy objectives. 4. to use the development of communication and information infrastructure within the framework of local pilot projects as an opportunity to initiate responsible economic and social developments. By means of social dialogue, social and economic interests should also be involved in shaping the future information society with a view to drawing up and testing the social acceptability of traffic rules for new networks and services, and promoting basic and advanced vocational training related to the application of new information and communication equipment, systems and services. 5. to take account of the globalisation of information. This was why the ESC emphasised the need to draw up clear, stable rules that would pave the way for the worldwide exchange of information with due regard to the requirements governing fair competition, the protection of privacy, security, and intellectual property. The ESC reserved the right to re-examine the problems linked to the information society as the subject matter was in a state of flux.