

Internet: multiannual action plan on promoting safer use

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This report from the Commission concerns the evaluation of the Multiannual Community Action Plan on promoting safer use of the Internet and new online technologies by combating illegal and harmful content primarily in the area of the protection of children and minors (1999-2002). During the years 1999 - 2002, 37 projects were co-financed, involving over 130 different organisations. Two service contracts were concluded for advice to self-regulatory bodies and for exchange of information about best practices. The Decision was amended by Decision 1151/2003/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 June 2003 extending the duration of the programme until 31 December 2004, increasing the indicative budget by EUR 13.3 million and making a number of changes to the title and scope of the programme and to its implementing actions. The Decision as amended provides in article 6(4) that at the end of four years, the Commission shall submit to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, once the committee referred to in Article 5 has examined it, an evaluation report on the results obtained in implementing the action plan. The Commission may present, on the basis of those results, proposals for adjusting the orientation of the action plan. The evaluators recognised the positive impact of the current programme, particularly in fostering networking and providing a wealth of information about the problems of safer use of the Internet and their solutions. The extension to the programme for 2003 - 2004 takes into account many of the conclusions which arose from the evaluation. The reorientation of the Action Plan in this extension is firmly supported by the results of the evaluation, particularly the concentration on additional forms of content, such as racism, and the introduction of actions targeted at new forms of communication such as peer-to-peer and 3G mobile phone technology. More specifically it was concluded that stakeholders agree that the programme's original objectives, priorities and means of implementation still apply, and that the action lines are appropriate mechanisms for the fulfilment of the objectives. The evaluators conclude that the European networking of the hotlines is extremely important. The programme has done a good job in producing a number of filtering software products although take-up of rating needs to be increased and not all stakeholders agree that filtering is the best approach to child protection. Awareness-raising remains an important focus. The developments in relevant societal, regulatory and technical areas have been taken into account. The programme is actively integrating itself with other community activities at the policy level. At the policy level, the programme has been successful in putting the issues of developing a safer Internet firmly on the agenda of the EU and the Member States. The foresight of the European Commission in identifying these issues early on in the development of the Internet should be recognised. At action-line level, the Commission has instigated the development of a network of hotlines in Europe with associated members in the US and Australia, funded research into tackling awareness-raising with a variety of end users, stimulated the development of filtering, taking into consideration the cultural and linguistic diversity of Europe and supported the development of an international rating system. The impact of some projects, particularly filtering, will still take time to assess properly. The EC style of project bringing together a range of organisations from different cultures and national backgrounds is particularly useful on this type of programme and produces networking and knowledge oriented impacts. The programme has been successful in linking up stakeholders to produce a 'community of actors', although there should be greater involvement of industry as well as self-regulation organisations and consumer groups. The evaluation report makes a number of recommendations under the following headings: 1) Relevance: - to extend emphasis/objectives to encompass new and emerging communication technologies that will in particular influence children's use of the Internet (e.g. 3G mobile telephones). Review the Action Line on filtering and rating. Continue to move towards networks of nodes for awareness-raising in the Member States. - the problems associated with trying to achieve a safer Internet are global. The Commission should continue to engage with actors external to the European Union. 2) Effectiveness and Impact: - the programme should encourage wider involvement of ISPs and other relevant industry players.

The Commission agrees. Hotlines already have strong industry input. The current awareness projects which are using a "node" approach have been successful in attracting industry support, and this approach will be generalised through networking awareness actions in the next round of projects in 2003 - 2004. The Safer Internet Forum will include among its members ISP and other relevant industry players. - a wealth of information and material has already been produced within the projects and should be made widely available. The Commission states that the Safer Internet Action Plan official web site provides information of the programme and links to the main projects web sites. Additionally, the saferinternet.org Web site gives "one-stop" access to the project results. This will continue as a task for the awareness network co-ordinator. - consideration should be given to reviewing the existing instruments in light of the dynamic nature of creating a safer Internet. - the programme should focus where it is likely to have the most impact which is at the European/International level through networking and multipliers. 3) Efficiency and Effectiveness: - the European Commission should review the administrative procedures in order to harmonise the approach with the types of projects to be funded. - the Action Plan should address how it is going to reconcile funding new hotlines in Candidate countries as well as existing hotlines on the same budget. Commission comment: The budget for hotlines in 2003 - 2004 has been increased, in a way that it should permit continuation of funding of the existing hotlines and the launch of new ones in acceding countries. - there should continue to be a market watch on issues relating to the law, regulation and codes of conduct. 4) Utility and sustainability : - the Commission should substantially review the implementation and support mechanisms proposed for any future actions in this area. Specifically, the Action Plan needs to address issues of the sustainability of the hotlines and have a more appropriate funding model for them particularly in light of enlargement. In conclusion, the Commission takes note of the findings and recommendations of the evaluation report on the programme. In the light of the Commission's responses, it invites the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions to: - continue their support for the role of the programme in promoting safer use of the Internet and new online technologies during 2003 - 2004; - continue an active debate on combating illegal and harmful content primarily in the area of the protection of children and minors.