

Internet: multiannual action plan on promoting safer use

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The Committee has adopted the report by Gerhard SCHMID (PES, D) on a multiannual Community action plan on promoting safe use of the Internet. The report was adopted unopposed, with one abstention. The action plan is intended to encourage an environment favourable to the development of the Internet industry, while promoting safer use of the Internet, and to complement other EU-funded measures dealing with the impact of the new technologies on the public. The committee believes that illegal and harmful content on the Internet, while limited, can be damaging to the mental health, safety and economic interests of consumers and thus affect the creation of an environment conducive to sound ethical standards. It shares the view of the Council's Legal Service, which maintains that the legal basis of the proposal should be changed (so as to use Article 129a of the Treaty, which provides for the codecision procedure, rather than Article 130). Combatting Internet content which is liable to prosecution is a matter for the Member States. In practice, this is made considerably more difficult by the fact that not even in the European Union are there identical or at least comparable legal standards governing important issues in this area. For example, prosecution in cases of child pornography is difficult if the term "child" is defined using different age limits. It is also difficult if a pointer to a site with content which is liable to prosecution (a "link" in the World Wide Web) is not itself liable to prosecution. Law enforcement also becomes impossible if servers can be operated anonymously and electronic mail sent anonymously. The committee argues that, in addition to legal research, account should be taken of the practical experience of Internet criminal offences gained by police forces.