Illegal and harmful content on the Internet: child protection and human dignity

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After pointing out that the freedom of expression remained absolutely essential in our democratic societies, Parliament acknowledged the need to address certain worrying phenomena observed on the Internet, which must not, however, be allowed to overshadow the cultural revolution made possible by the Internet, the opportunities of which for interactive communications may be of use to a large section of the population. In adopting the report by Mr PRADIER (ARE, FR) by 338 votes to 4, with 10 abstentions, Parliament called on the Commission to draw up a European quality rating system for providers of Internet services and to propose a common framework for self-regulation at EU level. It called on the Council to create a centralized register of missing children on the lines of the US 'Center for Missing and Exploited Children'. Drawing a distinction between the illicit content and the harmful content of information carried by the Internet, the rapporteur notes that the problem of harmful content is by nature identical to that found in traditional modes of communication. Parliament stresses that the main problem concerning illegal content concerns not so much Web pages themselves as newsgroups and electronic mail. It calls in particular: - on the Member States to define a minimum number of common rules in their criminal law and to strengthen administrative cooperation; - on the Commission to propose a common framework for self-regulation; - for police officials to be trained in the location and repression of forms of crime connected with telematic media. As regards harmful content, Parliament stresses the primacy of individual responsibility, especially within the family, but that public action can play a complementary role. Specifically, it calls for: - the Commission and the Member States to develop a common international rating system compatible with the PICS protocol, and sufficiently flexible to accommodate cultural differences; - providers of data over the Internet to be required to identify senders and to accept responsibility, including criminal-law responsibility for the content supplied to their subscribers. Parliament welcomes the initiatives by the industry to develop mechanisms of self-control, stresses the need for international cooperation between the EU and its main external partners and calls for the use of parental control systems using the newly-developed filtering techniques to be encouraged. Parliament calls on the Council to review and inform it, by October 1997, of the progress in particular in relation to the effectiveness of filtering and rating systems and the protection of children, given the rapid rate of technology change. It also calls on the Council to keep it informed of developments relating to the agreement reached at the Dublin meeting of justice and home affairs ministers, who agreed to step up police cooperation within Europol in order to combat paedophilia and trafficking in children and women.