Interoperability of digital interactive television services

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PURPOSE: to review the interoperability of digital interactive television services.

BACKGROUND: in July 2004, the Commission published a Communication setting out its position on the interoperability of digital interactive television services pursuant to Article 18(3) of Directive 2002/21 /EC on a common regulatory framework for electronic communications networks and services ('the Framework directive'). In that Communication, the Commission concluded that there was no clear case for mandating standards for interactive television, and indicated that the issue would be reviewed in 2005. The Communication also proposed the setting up of a working group to identify actions that could improve market take-up of the Multimedia Home Platform (MHP) standard. In May 2005, the Commission published a Communication on accelerating the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting proposing a target date of 2012 for Member States to make the transition to digital television and switch off analogue TV transmission. Moreover, in 2005 the European Parliament adopted a resolution on accelerating the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting (see RSP/2005/2634) as well as a non legislative resolution on the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting: an opportunity for the European politics in the audiovisual and cultural diversity areas in 2006 (see INI/2005/2212).

CONTENT: this review builds on that earlier assessment, and takes account of the market developments since July 2004. Over the past 18 months the Commission has held an intensive dialogue on digital TV interoperability with interested parties in both the public and private sector in the 'MHP Implementation Group'. This Group has been presented with reports of the situation in ten Member States, and has served as a forum for the exchange of ideas and best practice.

Developments in the market, particularly in Italy, have shown that interoperability can be achieved when stakeholders act together with a common aim to implement a technical standard like MHP, but that this in itself is not sufficient to ensure the emergence and growth of interactive digital television services; further business and technical developments are needed.

The Commission's priorities are now to work with Member States to ensure the successful switchover to digital TV, which is a pre-requisite for having interactive digital services, and to support open standards and the ongoing cooperation on interoperability and exchange of best practice between Member States and between stakeholders.

The Commission's priorities are to:

- work with Member States to ensure the successful switchover to digital TV – as the facilitator for interactive digital services: the Commission will follow up its Communication of May 2005 on switchover, and will be monitoring closely the progress in Member States. Information on the switchover plans of the Member States will be published regularly on the Europa Website;

- promote open standards and interoperability: in the context of digital switchover, interoperability of digital television services and technologies, the Commission will continue to promote open standards developed by European standards bodies;

- support cooperation between Member States and between stakeholders: the Commission will continue to bring together Member States in the Broadcasting subgroup of the Communications Committee, as a

forum for the exchange of experience and best practice on digital TV in general, and interactive digital TV in particular;

- promote international cooperation on digital TV open standards and interoperability: digital television has the potential to foster digital inclusion and social cohesion. The Commission will continue to promote open, interoperable standards for digital television so that content can be exchanged across the world. The Commission has established and funded a series of actions to promote international co-operation in research, development and standardisation on digital TV. This could be extended to international collaboration in implementation and production of digital TV;

- monitor use of proprietary technologies: the use of proprietary technologies will remain subject to competition law review.