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Convergence of telecommunications, media and information technology: second consultation

The European Commission is inviting comments on three issues concerning the convergence of telecommunications, the media and information technology. The deadline to respond is 3 November 1998. Traditionally, communications media (such as television, Internet services, telephones) were separate: they operated on different networks, and were regulated by different laws and regulations, usually at national level. Nowadays, digital technology allows traditional and new services to use the same networks. (Examples of these new convergent services are: Internet services delivered to television sets, email and Internet access via mobile telephones.) The European Commission has already carried out a five-month public consultation on how this new generation of convergent electronic media should be regulated, following publication of the Convergence Green Paper in December 1997. The Commission received 270 written comments from interested parties, but the Commission believes it would be useful to deepen the debate on three key issues, namely:

- access to networks and digital gateways in a converging environment;
- creating the framework for investment, innovation, and encouraging European content production, distribution and availability;
- ensuring a balanced approach to regulation.

The detailed questions are set out in the working document of the European Commission, which was published on 29 July 1998. The working document that contains a summary of the first consultation process is available at: http://www.ispo.cec.be/convergencegp/gpworkdoc.html. The responses to these questions will assist the Commission in determining policy options at the end of the year. The Commission intends to approve an action plan in December, proposing the principles on which legislation will have to be based. Preparation of the action plan will take account of the opinion of the European Parliament, expected in October 1998. Any legislative proposals will be launched later in 1999.

Studies and service contracts in the field of library technology: list of interest

On 21 August the European Commission published a call for expressions of interest for studies and service contracts in the domain of a mix of library technology areas of both European and
international scope, ranging from:

- library automation and networks to resource discovery issues;
- digital libraries applications in traditional contexts;
- cross-domain collaboration between libraries and other heritage institutions such as museums and archives.

The deadline for sending expressions of interest is 20 September 1998. The list resulting from this call will remain valid until 14 August 2001. The European Commission will not be able to invite any organisations to tender who are not on this list. For more information please contact: European Commission, DG XIII/E-4 Electronic Publishing and Libraries, rue Alcide de Gasperi, Euroforum Building 1274, L-2910 Luxembourg; Tel: +352 4301 32923; fax: +352 4301 33530; http://www2.echo.lu/libraries/en/libraries.html

**Action Plan on promoting safe use of the Internet: call for tenders**

While awaiting the final decision of the Council of Ministers on the Action Plan on promoting safe use of the Internet, the European Commission has published a call for tenders to prepare actions for implementing the Action Plan, covering the following areas:

- preparatory work for setting up hotlines in EU Member States and launching a European network of hotlines to gather information on illegal content;
- feasibility study for a European system of content self-rating;
- review of European third-party filtering and rating software and services;
- preparation of awareness actions taking into account the cultural and linguistic diversity of users (parents, teachers).

The necessary tender documents should be requested before 14 September 1998, and the deadline for submitting tenders is 24 September 1998. For further information please contact: European Commission, DG XIII/E-1, Invitation to tender PREP-ACT, EUFO 1267, rue Alcide de Gasperi, L-2920 Luxembourg; Fax: +352 4301 34079; http://www2.echo.lu/iap/prep-act.html

**Culture: Council of Ministers confirmed its position on European Cities of Culture**

Following its political agreement in May, the Council of Culture Ministers approved on 31 July its common position on the designation of European Cities of Culture for the years 2001 to 2004, and on the follow-up Community action entitled "The European Capital of Culture". Under this action cities will be designated by way of a country rotating system for the years 2005 to 2018. However, the decision will probably be challenged by the European Parliament at its second reading on the subject. The Parliament opposes the idea of selecting towns such a long time in advance without even knowing their cultural programmes.

**Fifth Framework programme: Commission proposed to open it up for Central and**
**Eastern Europe**

The European Commission called on the Council of Ministers to open up the **Fifth Framework programme for research, technological development and demonstration (1998-2002)** to the eleven candidate countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovak Republic and Slovenia). The Commission proposed that organisations from the candidate countries should participate in the Fifth Framework programme under basically the same conditions as organisations from the Member States of the European Union, in return for contributions to the budget of the programme. This would open up a rich source of new cooperation possibilities.

The opening of the Fifth Framework programme to the eleven candidate countries is seen as one of the instruments of the pre-accession strategy. It should speed up their integration into the scientific and technological community at European level, and their preparation for accession to the European Union. All eleven candidate countries have formally informed the European Commission that they wish to participate in the programme, although the financial contribution required from the countries could present some difficulties. Therefore, the countries will be offered a reduction in their contribution in the early years. In addition, some funding could be made available through the national Phare programmes for the Central and Eastern European countries. It is hoped that the negotiations on the participation in the Fifth Framework programme can be concluded in time for the launch of the programme at the end of this year. It is also envisaged, in order to ensure maximum participation from these countries, to promote awareness of the new opportunities through a series of measures, including conferences, training seminars, brochures and information on the Internet.

**Mediterranean: European Training Foundation extended to Mediterranean region**

The Council of Ministers recently approved an amendment to the **European Training Foundation's** regulation allowing it to extend its activities to the countries in the Mediterranean region that are covered by the MEDA programme (Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey and the Palestinian Authority). The European Training Foundation was established in January 1995 and supported so far vocational training reform in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as well as the New Independent States of the former Soviet Union and Mongolia. Furthermore, it implements Phare and Tacis programmes on behalf of the European Commission and provides the Commission with technical assistance for the implementation of the Tempus programme. The new training activities with regard to Mediterranean countries will be included in the 1999 work programme of the Foundation.