

COM-7/027

Brussels, 9 January 2001

**OPINION**

of the

Committee of the Regions

of 14 December 2000

on a

**Proposal for a Council decision adopting a multiannual programme to stimulate the development and use of European digital content on the global networks**

**and to promote the linguistic diversity in the Information Society**

COM(2000) 323 final - 2000/0128 (CNS)

**The Committee of the Regions**

**Having regard to:**

- the Proposal for a Council decision adopting a multiannual programme to stimulate the development and use of European digital content on the global networks and to promote the linguistic diversity in the Information Society COM(2000) 323 final - 2000/0128(CNS);
- the decision taken by the European Commission on 12 July 2000, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to consult the Committee of the regions on this matter;
- the decision taken by the President of the Committee of the Regions on 3 August 2000 to instruct Commission 7 "Education, Vocational Training, Culture, Youth, Sport and Citizens' Rights" to draw up the relevant Opinion;
- the COR Opinion on the Commission Green Paper: Public sector information: a key resource

for Europe Green Paper on public sector information in the information society COM(1998) 585 final CdR 190/99 fin<sup>1</sup>;

- the COR Opinion on "INFO 2000" COM(95) 149 final CdR 22/96 fin<sup>2</sup>;
- the COR Opinion on the Communication from the Commission on the multilingual information society and the Proposal for a Council Decision on the adoption of a multiannual programme to promote the linguistic diversity of the Community in the information society (COM(95) 486 final) CdR 220/96 fin<sup>3</sup>;
- the draft opinion adopted by Commission 7 on 3 October 2000 (CdR 316/2000 COM 7/027) (rapporteur: **Mr Aldo Iskra (SV-EPP)**).

**adopted the following opinion unanimously at its 36<sup>th</sup> ... plenary session on 13-14 December 2000 (meeting of 14 December ...).**

#### **1. The Committee of the Regions' views concerning the proposed Decision**

1. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the fact that the Commission continues to concentrate on the scope for personal and social development offered by the Internet revolution.
2. The Committee of the Regions takes the view that the proposal for a multiannual Community programme to stimulate the development and use of European digital content on the global networks and to promote linguistic diversity in the information society can help to meet the need for content-based products and services on the part of both the individual citizen and society as a whole. The proposal intensifies the drive to encourage new social groups to use the Internet.
3. The Committee of the Regions takes the view that linguistic and cultural customisation of information and transactions is important from the economic viewpoint, but also in employment terms. Through linguistic diversity on the Internet, large segments of the European public will have greater access to the aids offered by the information society. Increased access reduces costs for both producer and consumer as well as creating the conditions for entrepreneurship and new job opportunities.
4. The Committee of the Regions stresses that a large part of Europe's population has been bypassed by the Internet revolution. Apart from inadequate linguistic knowledge, there are many other factors contributing to this "deprivation", such as a lack of computers, a low level of basic education, underdeveloped technical skills, or mental, physical and social handicaps. Use of the Internet is highly generation-linked, and this factor must be taken into account. Some generations run the risk of not benefiting at all from the possibilities offered by the "Internet society". The speed of change in the Internet field is very rapid, and differences between users could increase dramatically.

5. The Committee of the Regions takes the view that today's new challenges must be met by being able to draw on new platforms and tools. Networks must be developed where local and regional authorities work in partnership with entrepreneurs, business and individual citizens. The accessibility of the Internet must increase through more people having access to computers but also through user support. Acceptance of linguistic diversity would make it easier for many who currently see themselves as strangers to the Internet world. It is also important to have help from expert staff in the public sector, as well as from entrepreneurs and voluntary associations.
6. The Committee of the Regions feels that the commitment of local and regional authorities is essential for achieving progress in the effort to increase the interfaces between actors in the public sector and Internet entrepreneurs. Horizontal rather than hierarchical work models must be chosen. To work openly and flexibly is also important for encouraging new target groups to use the Internet.
7. The COR believes that in looking at the issue of access to public sector information one must begin by looking at what information the consumer/citizen requires.
8. The Committee of the Regions takes the view that measures in the Internet field which boost accessibility, raise skills and advance knowhow among individual citizens also encourage social dialogue and thereby also strengthen democracy.

## 2. The Committee of the Regions' recommendations concerning the proposed Decision

### Stimulating the exploitation of public sector information

1. The COR notes that new technologies facilitate the collection, storage, processing and retrieval of information. User-friendly and readily available administrative, legislative, financial or other public information enables economic actors to make fully informed decisions.
2. The COR in its Opinion on INFO 2000 stressed that effective creation and exploitation of multimedia technology in public sector communication with citizens and businesses can help sharpen the competitive edge of small businesses on national and international markets. This can also improve access of citizens to public sector information: an essential aspect in promoting a participatory civil society which should continue to be focused upon.
3. The Committee of the Regions wishes to encourage the creation of local and regional steering groups consisting of local entrepreneurs, technicians, artists and teachers. Such "spearheads" working at local and regional levels could identify local and regional actors in the Internet field and bring together people with ideas, language skills and entrepreneurial capacity. Dialogue with potential providers of funds is essential and should therefore be initiated at an early stage.
4. The COR supports the Commission's proposal for experiments started under INFO 2000 to be accelerated and expanded to provide good practice, these should in particular involve local and regional authorities.
5. The Committee of the Regions would like attention to be focused on a number of European "pilot cases" and resources to be invested in the creation of prototypes which can operate partly as information centres and partly as catalysts of similar processes.

- Such a selection process presupposes exhaustive "mapping" which can effectively show measurable results and statistically supported effects.
6. The COR recommends that the establishment of European data collections should be supported. The COR notes that the absence of datasets at European level constitutes one of the barriers to the exploitation of the content potential.
  7. The COR welcomes the proposal for applications of language technology to be promoted among the administrations of Member States. This should be strongly supported in particular in local and regional authorities.
  8. The COR underlines that given the type of information which local and regional authorities collect, privacy for the individual and personal data protection is paramount and must continue to be so. A balanced scheme is required under any moves to increase access to public sector information, particularly where local and regional authorities are involved.
  9. The Committee of the Regions stresses the importance of public authorities presenting information on the Internet, and adjusting announcements and payment messages to Internet practices.
  10. The COR would emphasise how important it is to give disabled people access to the Internet.
  11. The COR underlines the importance of the principle that increasing public access to Internet should not lead to the imposition of excessive administrative or economic burdens on local or regional authorities.
  12. The COR emphasises the need for transparency and the importance of information which is free (i.e. provided free of charge) to the greatest possible extent. Access to information is of prime importance in the construction of the information society. Consequently it is essential for the role of the public sector, and more specifically that of libraries, to be taken into account.
  13. There exists a rich stock of information collections in museums, libraries, copyright and patent deposit systems, educational and training bodies, historical archives and architectural and industrial objects. Many of these collections are still in analogue form but are gradually being digitised. The INFO 2000 programme aimed at mobilising these digital collections for exploitation by the private sector. While the COR has supported this goal, it believes that the commercial exploitation may also come from the public sector as well as the private sector. However, the COR stresses the need to ensure that the public authorities' role of distributing free information is not compromised.

#### Enhancing linguistic and cultural customisation

14. The COR agrees with the European Commission that linguistic differences slow down growth and may hamper overall development of European industries linked to digital content. Adequate support for multilingual and cross-cultural information access and exchange is a key enabler for the development of a European mass market for information products and services. The COR calls on the European Commission to recognise the acknowledged role of local and regional authorities in promoting

multilingual access.

15. A strong concern of the COR is that the European integration process should respect and preserve cultural diversity upon which citizens' sense of cultural identity is based. The COR calls for local and regional authorities' crucial role in shaping and supporting the rich variety of cultures in the EU to be recognized.
16. The COR believes that supporting linguistic customisation of digital products and services will add to the export potential of European content firms.
17. The proposed actions constitute a follow-up to actions carried out under the MLIS programme adapted to an increasingly digital environment. Special attention will be given to SMEs and start ups and to less widely spoken EU languages and languages of potential new Member States. The COR strongly supports this action line. It stresses that since local and regional government is the level of government closest to SMEs and has developed economic development strategies to encourage the formation and growth of SMEs, their contribution in this area should be recognized.
18. The COR notes the need for a solid base linguistic infrastructure, networked and readily available, that can facilitate the customisation work in all phases of the process. The European Commission aims to establish an open framework comprising standardised and interoperable multilingual resources encompassing e.g. electronic lexicons, corpora, translation memories and terminology collections. These resources will be pooled together to yield accessible repositories. The COR stresses that access to, and promotion of the use of, such an infrastructure should involve in particular local and regional authorities.
19. The COR takes the view that initiatives to train teachers and librarians in Internet techniques are of decisive importance.
20. The COR wishes to draw attention to the possibility of recruiting interpreters and translators from deprived urban areas. By focusing on young and marginalised groups of immigrants with language knowledge, new groups can be reached and important skills can be acquired.
21. The COR wishes to encourage the training of mentors and "firebrands" who in their turn can work in their associations and at the workplace to foster a new attitude towards the new media. As well as an understanding of the Internet's possibilities, this should increase "customer skills".
22. The proposed actions will support partnerships between digital content and language industries. Private and public sector content providers and distributors will be stimulated to make their products and services available in a broader range of languages, IT vendors encouraged to provide new tools and delivery channels. The COR maintains that this is essential in order for effective implementation of the proposal. The COR calls for local and regional authorities to be involved in promoting partnerships and raising awareness amongst all actors.
23. Given that fostering European linguistic solidarity would have definite economic implications for those regions lagging behind significantly in language terms, particularly where tourism and product promotion are concerned, the COR points out that the programme could in many regions be used to strengthen already existing projects.

Supporting market enablers

24. The COR notes that investors are reluctant to provide capital for medium term risk bearing projects and ventures. Venture capital availability to Internet entrepreneurs in the US is estimated to be around 3-4 times higher than in Europe. Access to risk capital needs and rights clearance process need to be facilitated throughout the EU. The COR notes that small scale enterprises encounter most difficulties in obtaining necessary funding to evolve effectively.
25. The COR maintains that the prime responsibility for developing, investing in and exporting European content rests with the digital content industries themselves. However, to tackle the barriers and exploit the opportunities, the COR welcomes the Commission's proposal for supportive action at EU level.

Brussels, 14 December 2000.

The President

The Secretary-General

of the

of the

Committee of the Regions

Committee of the Regions

**Jos Chabert**

**Vincenzo Falcone**

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<sup>1</sup> OJ C 57, 29.2.2000, p.11

<sup>2</sup> OJ C 129, 2.5.1996, p.39

<sup>3</sup> OJ C 337, 11.11.1996, p.45

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