European Commission: Promoting Safer Use of the Internet by Combating Illegal and Harmful Content on Global Networks

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The European Commission has presented to the Council and the European Parliament its final evaluation of the implementation of the multiannual Community Action Plan on promoting safer use of the Internet by combating illegal and harmful content on global networks (SIAP) for the period 2003-2004. The report presented conclusions with respect to the effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, utility and impact of the programme, and it formulated recommendations.

The SIAP was designed to promote safer use of the Internet and to encourage at European level an environment favourable to the development of the Internet industry. The original programme's main line of action was the creation of a safer environment through the promotion of hotlines, the encouragement of self-regulation and codes of conduct, the development of filtering, labelling and rating systems and the raising of awareness. In the period 2003/2004, EU funding concentrated on hotlines and awareness while the programme's scope was expanded so as to include new technologies primarily with the aim of enhancing the protection of children and minors. In general, the SIAP was appraised by all stakeholders as a relevant and effective programme that should continue. The European Union was seen as being a pioneer in having identified at an early stage illegal and harmful content on the Internet as a serious and important political question of a global dimension.

More particularly, the launching of national hotlines was considered as one of the major achievements of the SIAP while their services were evaluated as useful, relevant and effective. Nevertheless, it was recommended that the visibility of the hotlines be increased and cooperation between the hotlines and other stakeholders, in particular the police and ISPs, be enhanced. With regard to the development of "awareness nodes" - the necessity of which was strongly underlined - they were seen as remaining at an early stage of development and as failing to reach a wider number of target groups, while being given a low priority on the public policy agendas. In this respect, the evaluation pointed to the need for focusing the awareness-raising on specific target groups (particularly children, parents or teachers) and of improving outreach. The report further suggested involving children and young people in identifying problems and

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designing solutions. In the field of filtering technologies, knowledge of the relevant software at the end-user level was found to be limited. An increase in the end-users' awareness of the options available was recommended.

Although certain positive developments in industry self-regulation, codes of conduct and best practices were noted and their encouragement recommended, the progress in the area of labelling and rating systems was considered unsatisfactory despite their fundamental relevance to Internet safety. The importance of harmonising national legislation, particularly relating to illegal and harmful content and youth protection, was highlighted together with the new problems emerging as a result of the future diffusion of new Internet enabled end-user devices (e.g. next generation mobiles) and new practices (e.g. social networking, Internet Blogging and File Sharing). It was therefore recommended that the possibilities of new technologies and user options be mapped.

The Commission stated that it will take account of the recommendations in implementing the SIAP and planning a future follow-up programme, while declaring that support will be given to hotlines producing joint lists of illegal content to be communicated to Internet Service Providers. Furthermore, in the light of its responses to the evaluators' report, the Commission invited the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions to take note of the successful implementation of the SIAP and to assist it in making it future-proof.

Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, final evaluation of the implementation of the multiannual Community Action Plan on promoting safer use of the Internet by combating illegal and harmful content on global networks, 6 November 2006, COM (2006) 663 final

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