Communication on Shaping Europe’s digital future

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Ronan Ó Fathaigh
Institute for Information Law (IViR)

On 19 February 2020, the European Commission published its important Communication on Shaping Europe’s digital future, which sets out the Commission’s focus for the next five years (2020-2025) on “Creating a Europe fit for the digital age”, including a specific action plan for the media and audiovisual sector.

The Communication begins with the Commission noting that it would focus on three key objectives to ensure that digital solutions help Europe towards a digital transformation, namely: (a) technology that works for people, (b) a fair and competitive economy, and (c) an open, democratic and sustainable society. The Communication then proceeds to elaborate upon these three key objectives, and the key actions that will be implemented.

Firstly, in relation to technology that works for people, the Commission sets out a number of key actions it will adopt. These include accelerating investments in Europe’s Gigabit connectivity, through a revision of the Broadband Cost Reduction Directive; an updated Action Plan on 5G and 6G; and a new Radio Spectrum Policy Programme. There will also be a Digital Education Action Plan to boost digital literacy and competences at all levels of education.

Secondly, regarding a fair and competitive economy, the Communication focuses on online platforms, and states that some platforms have “acquired significant scale, which effectively allows them to act as private gatekeepers to markets, customers and information.” As such, the Commission states that “[w]e must ensure that the systemic role of certain online platforms and the market power they acquire will not put in danger the fairness and openness of our market.” In this regard, the key actions under this theme will include: a European Data Strategy to make Europe a global leader in the data-agile economy; a legislative framework for data governance (in Q4 2020); and a possible Data Act (in 2021). In addition, there will be an evaluation and review of the fitness of EU competition rules for the digital age (over the period 2020-2023), and the launch of a sector inquiry (in 2020). Notably, the Commission will further explore, in the context of the Digital Services Act package, ex ante rules to ensure that markets characterised by large platforms with significant network effects, acting as gatekeepers, remain fair and contestable for innovators, businesses and new market entrants (in Q4 2020).

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Thirdly, in relation to an open and democratic society, the Communication notes that it is essential that the rules applicable to digital services across the European Union be strengthened and modernised, and that the roles and responsibilities of online platforms be clarified. Furthermore, in a "world where much of the public debate and political advertising has moved online, we must also be prepared to act to forcefully defend our democracies." Crucially, the Communication states that trustworthy, quality media is a key element for democracy as well as for cultural diversity, and "with these in mind, the Commission will present a European Democracy Action Plan and a specific action plan for the media and audiovisual sector." In this regard, key actions will include: (a) new and revised rules to deepen the Internal Market for Digital Services, by increasing and harmonising the responsibilities of online platforms and information service providers and reinforcing the oversight over platforms' content policies in the European Union (in Q4 2020, as part of the Digital Services Act package); (b) a media and audiovisual Action Plan to support the digital transformation and competitiveness of the audiovisual and media sector, to stimulate access to quality content and media pluralism (in Q4 2020); and (c) a European Democracy Action Plan to improve the resilience of our democratic systems, support media pluralism and address the threats of external intervention in European elections (Q4 2020).

Finally, the Communication concludes by addressing the international dimension of the issue, maintaining that it would use all instruments at its disposal to ensure that everyone respects EU legislation and international rules in order to maintain a level playing field in the digital sector.

European Commission, Shaping Europe's Digital Future, 19 February 2020

https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-shaping-europes-digital-future-feb2020_en_4.pdf

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