

Opinion on the proposal for a Council Decision concerning a specific programme of research and technological development (R&TD) in the field of telematic systems in areas of general interest (1990-1994) ⁽¹⁾

(91/C 41/03)

On 6 June 1990 the Council decided to consult the Economic and Social Committee, under Article 130Q(2) of the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community, on the abovementioned proposal.

The Section for Energy, Nuclear Questions and Research, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its Opinion on 7 November 1990. The Rapporteur was Mr Flum.

At its 281st plenary session (meeting of 20 November 1990), the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following Opinion unanimously.

1. Description of the programme

1.1. The aim of the Commission proposal is to create the preconditions for setting up European telematic networks in areas of general interest. The following priorities have been selected:

- 1) exchange of information between national administrations;
- 2) control and management of road and air transport;
- 3) health care;
- 4) distance learning;
- 5) libraries;
- 6) linguistic research and engineering.

1.2. A total budget of 380 million ECU is earmarked for the programme, divided up as follows between the various areas (as %): area 1: 29-33, area 2: 30-34, area 3: 15-17, area 4: 10-12, area 5: 6-7, area 6: 5-6.

1.3. All these have two features in common:

- a) They essentially concern the conditions for future services, above all in public sectors.
- b) They essentially concern relations between the suppliers and users of public services i.e. between public servants and citizens—and hence the quality of services as products.

1.4. The aim of the proposed programme is to computerize functions and relations in the above areas, i.e. to transfer these functions and relations partly or wholly to automated information and communication systems.

2. General comments on the research programme

The Committee basically welcomes the proposed programme because it can help to promote Community integration. The programme can be the basis for a far-ranging, rational introduction of information technology into the public services in the Community, taking comprehensive data protection into account. To this end, the Committee asks for the following points to be borne in mind:

2.1. The draft programme assumes that completion of the Internal Market will entail an increased demand for telematic services. In the Committee's opinion this assumption needs to be examined more closely in the light of the following:

— Whether or not the demand for public services is increased depends entirely on the way in which public tasks are reorganized at national and European levels.

— Only when a socially sound plan for the organization of these tasks has been developed will it be possible to say whether the computerization of individual services is useful.

— This answer cannot be found by applying the principle that the greatest possible use has to be made of automated information and communication systems. Given the high risks involved in a far-reaching 'computerization' of public tasks (data protection risks, vulnerability risks, threats to the purpose of services, deterioration in the providers of the services' working conditions, etc.) it is better to proceed on the principle that the tasks taken over by electronic networks should be limited to what is necessary and socially acceptable.

⁽¹⁾ OJ No C 174, 16. 7. 1990, p. 19.

2.2. The draft programme aims to create the theoretical, technological and prenormative basis for the gradual introduction of European telematic networks. The creation of this basis means that important decisions are being taken in advance for the future of the sectors in question. The Committee takes the view that these tasks entail a number of problems and risks, of which the research programmes take little or no account.

2.3. These fundamental relationships between promotion of research into telematic services and the future of these services necessitate the participation of interested parties in the proposed measures, to ensure that their interests are taken into account even at the prenormative and normative stages of the innovation processes. The draft programme completely omits to take account of the basic need for the democratic involvement of all interests in the organization of technology and work. The participation envisaged is confined to technology manufacturers, network operators, suppliers of telecommunications services and the institutions which will use these services on an experimental basis. The employers', workers' and consumers' groups affected are excluded.

2.4. The result of the planned promotion of research will have a decisive effect on the quality of the services and the functions in question, without there being any assessment of whether and in what way the intended computerization of services and functions may be counter-productive. For example, it is likely that the planned automation of distance learning may suppress even further the social interaction essential to learning processes. There is also a risk that the further computerization of patient care in the health sector may push vital elements of the healing process even more into the background. The social groups concerned must therefore be able to participate from the start in the planning of research and development (R&D) measures.

2.5. a) The networking of Europe-wide telematic services will also bring far-reaching changes for work in the service sector, especially in terms of work organization, content of work, health hazards and other stresses at the workplace, and quality requirements. It must therefore be ensured at an early stage that possible effects on later organization of work and techniques are already taken into account when innovations are planned.

b) The networking of telematic systems also raises the question of protection of authors' rights (protection of intellectual property) in many fields; this question has not yet been addressed in the programmes, and needs to be clarified.

3. Conclusions

3.1. The starting-point and basis for the proposed research measures must in principle be the development of protected citizen-orientated and worker-orientated organizations and operational blueprints for public services.

3.2. The Committee would like once more to draw special attention to the following points:

- basic provision for high-level data protection, especially with programmes 1 and 3;
- guaranteed protection of authors' rights⁽¹⁾, particularly with programmes 4, 5 and 6;
- careful monitoring of the proposed programmes, e.g. for distance learning, language learning and patient care in the health sector;
- safeguarding of legitimate interests in the fields of worker protection, work organization, and hazards at work, and as regards quality requirements in the setting up of the relevant telematic systems;
- participation of the interested groups, most notably consumers, workers and employers.

3.3. In the Committee's view,

- a) the Commission's planned report and the results of its review (Article 5 of the proposed programme) should also be addressed to the ESC; planned changes to the programme must be referred to the ESC in accordance with the Treaties;
- b) social groupings such as employers, workers and consumers must be given the opportunity to submit suggestions and comments to the committee envisaged in Article 6.

3.4. The measures regarded as necessary by the ESC for promoting research into the effects of technology and into alternatives should not be carried out separately from the technological research itself, but must be promoted as an integral part of the various technological research areas (telematic networks for administrators, etc.). A reasonable proportion (at least 10%) of the overall budgets for these areas must go to financing the promotion of such measures.

⁽¹⁾ See also the Committee Opinion on the Commission's Green Paper on copyright and the challenge of technology, OJ No C 71, 20. 3. 1989, p. 9.

3.5. The Committee assumes that the Commission will take the necessary decisions on staffing to ensure that the programme can be implemented successfully.

4. Final remarks

4.1. The ESC has taken it upon itself to set out its suggestions and opinions very clearly here. Its intention

is to contribute to a Community in which citizens do not automatically have the feeling of belonging to a 'computerized', i.e. electronically interlinked, society rates technological potential higher than safeguards for individual liberties.

4.2. The ESC therefore calls on the Commission to take these concerns very seriously and to bear them in mind when it revises the proposal.

Done at Brussels, 20 November 1990.

*The Chairman
of the Economic and Social Committee*

François STAEDLIN
