

## **POSITION PAPER:**

### **Recommendations on the subject of Research and Education in the area of the Information Society**

The Information Society, as a concept and a vision, is the driving force of a major shift in communication and information management. ECCR acknowledges the decisive role played by the European institutions and the Commission in particular, together with other international organisations such as OECD, the World Bank, the Unesco and ITU, not only to promote, but also to shape and map out a mainspring of European development.

However, there are clear signs that the IS is loosing momentum and has now reached a decisive crossroads. The initial vision which drove the first and spectacular phase of ICT development led to a model based predominantly on technology and commerce which did not live up to the expectations. Evidence suggests that implementation of ICTs will lead to a mature and desirable Information society only if certain conditions can be met, and challenges be faced, not in discourse but in facts:

- Bridging the digital divide (1): access to ICTs should be made possible not necessarily to everybody indistinctively, but especially to those who are underprivileged.
- Bridging the digital divide (2): giving access to technologies is worthless unless a matching effort is undertaken in education so as to level up the users' skills and ability to make efficient and responsible use of these technologies, not only to find and retrieve relevant content (including local content), but also to produce and make available their own content.
- Internet governance: although the Internet embodies a certain vision of freedom, the Information Society cannot be left to the law of the strongest, nor can it be regulated by particular interests, be they of a nation or an industry.
- Enhancing democracy: the emerging technologies must determinedly serve the advent of democracy and, in already democratic regimes, feed a process of revival of political institutions and citizens participation beyond mere governmental web sites or fancy e-voting.

Europe needs a new, clearer and carefully thought vision which can be referred to in innovating, implementing, using and regulating the Information or the Knowledge Society in the making. ECCR believes that this can only be achieved through an increased and redeployed effort in *research* and *education*, in consultation with the academic community. Given the complexity of the issues, efforts to structure and sustain academic *networking* initiatives are to be increased.

*Research* is excessively concentrated in the areas of technological innovation and market development, both areas feeding each other in a circular relationship, with a prevailing priority on short term return on investment and industrial applications. Meanwhile there is an endemic deficit of research aiming at solutions to identified problems within a broader societal perspective. As a result, there is an urgent need for a sizeable effort to undertake or revitalise research in neglected areas, promoting social research not in addition, but in close connection with industrial research from the earliest stages of development.

In full accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, and given the intrinsic transnational nature of the Information Society in the making, the European institutions are to enhance efforts and activity in high level research, with a particular emphasis in the following perspectives:

- Scientific research, along with policy making, are to develop beyond mere market regulation and development to encompass the social aspects of communication in the broadest sense, focusing specifically on the users, their expectations, their fears, their needs; studying the social and cultural implications of the Information Society.
- The perspectives on the Information Society are to be broadened beyond the spectacular, yet restrictive questions of innovations associated with the internet and mobile communication to include all vectors of information flows including traditional media and the entertainment industry.
- In particular, there is an urgent need to examine the role of public service and community radio and television in Europe and to determine the way in which it can balance the rapid evolution of private broadcasters towards a certain vision of media content driven by the sole concern of attracting audience.
- European authorities are to establish clear standards of indicators to monitor the various aspects of the development and implementation of the Information Society and carry out the measures and analysis thereof.

Sound policy and more generally harmonious development of societies in Europe require extensive, transdisciplinary, transnational and long term research efforts involving the scientific community and in close connection with civil society, the industry and political institutions, thus amplifying the participatory processes initiated within the World Summit for the Information Society (WSIS), for the benefit of all.

Regarding the funds allocated by the European Union to scientific research, we acknowledge the efforts of the Commission to support the academic research community in a context where other sources of funding, particularly that of national governments, are lacking dramatically. We acknowledge also the latest improvements which can be found in the 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Program for Research and Development. We regret, however, the lack of transparency in determining the priority topics covered by the programme, and we call also for a thorough reorganization of the evaluation process which, in its current form, has been a massive source of misunderstanding, of missed opportunities and, ultimately, of loss of motivation.

*Education* efforts are to be developed dramatically. Current initiatives are meagre and concentrate on the acquisition of computer skills with an overwhelming focus on tasks oriented tools and procedures, falling short of providing even the minimal foundation needed to orient oneself in the Information Society in the making. The severe deficit of adequate education leads to a new form of illiteracy which entails societal risks comparable to that of illiteracy of the past centuries. This deficit is just as dramatic as regards media literacy efforts with children as well as with adults, which remains in no way proportionate to the role that media have taken as a prime source of information, culture and leisure.

Just like the Information Society should be considered in a broader perspective, the education deficit is to be framed within the pre-existing shortage of media education at large. The scarce attention given to media in educational systems is in complete discrepancy with the prevailing role played by television in particular and increasingly by internet and video games, in shaping people's access to information as well as their sociability at large.

ECCR recommends that the European Commission encourages actively a structured and systematic approach to critical media literacy at all levels in a similar way that it encourages the development of other basic skills such as command of foreign languages.