



European Economic and Social Committee



Towards a more
responsible use of the internet:
The proposals of
the European civil society

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Opening up the internet debate

We live in the age of the internet. Our professional and social lives are increasingly influenced and dominated by the online world we have created, a development that has brought numerous benefits. We are now able to book flights, communicate across the globe and do business at the click of a button. These changes have happened at an astonishing speed.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has been a consistent voice in discussions surrounding online communication. In fact, we have been debating issues of safety, privacy and human dignity in electronic communications and media for nearly two decades. In the last five years we have produced a set of coherent and robust opinions on the matter, which have positively influenced the current debate.

The Committee, for example, wants to see online security concerns addressed and a comprehensive strategy to safeguard children online put in place. We want to see stringent rules and sanctions to combat illegal activities, and encourage the development of skills relating to the safe use of the internet and online applications.

Most fundamentally, we believe it is vitally important that this discussion about the future of the internet is inclusive and brought into the public arena, to involve as many citizens as possible. This is where we can make a real difference. By providing a platform for Europe's social and economic partners, we aim to ensure that every policy decision has the interests of citizens at heart. This is especially pertinent in 2013: the European Year of Citizens.

We hope that this publication will give you a better understanding of the Committee's position on this important issue, and why this is a debate worth having. After all, the internet impacts on the professional and personal life of every European.



Stéphane BUFFETAUT
President of the Transport,
Energy, Infrastructures and
Information Society Section

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Buffetaut'.

Leila KURKI
President of the Employment,
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Citizenship Section

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Leila Kurki'.

Bryan CASSIDY
President of the Single Market,
Production and
Consumption Section

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Why this Committee matters

The EESC has an impressive track record in helping to frame the debate on how we should manage the internet. The Committee has adopted landmark opinions on safety, privacy and fundamental rights stretching back 20 years, giving voice to citizens' concerns and bringing an extra dimension to European decision-making.

Fundamentally, we believe that the internet is a positive force for good, creating new economic opportunities and encouraging new forms of social interaction. Social networking sites (SNS) for example have transformed the way in which we communicate; a 2011 European Commission Survey found that out of 250 000 young people in 25 EU countries, 77% had social network accounts.

We fully understand, however, that issues such as fraud, cyber-bullying, pornography and gambling must be urgently addressed in order to ensure that the internet continues to be used in a responsible and beneficial manner. While censorship is not an option, the EESC strongly agrees that an 'anything goes' policy on electronic media is not acceptable.

Achieving compromise and balance on complex social and economic issues is what we do. Through discussion and consensus-building, we formulate positions, expressed in what are called opinions, which ensure that the issues that concern civil society are properly reflected at the level of European decision-making.

What we want to see now is a concerted push for a more coordinated European approach to address the future of the internet. We believe that this is the only way we will effectively achieve our objectives, and enable citizens to benefit fully from the online revolution.

This is why we welcome the recent developments that have taken place at the EU level. The Commission's Digital Agenda 2010-2020, for example, addresses the need to maximise the economic and social potential of IT in Europe. The Commission's Safer Internet Programme for 2009-2013 targets internet safety for European children, and finances projects aiming to create a safer online environment for them.

These initiatives must now be built upon. We want to encourage as broad a discussion as possible. All options should be examined, from industry self-regulation to direct regulatory intervention, and the views and the needs of all citizens must be taken into account at all times. We hope that this brochure provides you with a better understanding of the EESC's role in this important debate, and the influence our opinions have had.



Tackling the issues

The EESC exists to encourage active and fruitful dialogue between Europe's social and economic partners, the outcomes of which are communicated to the European institutions in the form of opinions. Through the expertise and breadth of experience of its members, the Committee has become an influential and respected partner in the formulation of a coordinated European approach to electronic communication. Over the past two decades, the EESC's opinions have covered a range of critical issues.

Ensuring internet safety

The EESC wants decision-makers to face up to the social implications of the internet. While the internet has brought huge benefits, the unregulated online world presents risks. The inappropriate use of SNS can leave various social groups, notably adolescents, vulnerable to problems such as addiction, isolation and cyber-bullying.

While European policies have mainly addressed internet security and the protection of minors from abuse, the psychological aspects of SNS have not yet been properly tackled. The Committee also believes there needs to be a sharper focus on education and information, to improve digital literacy and better inform vulnerable groups about online dangers.

Advocating an international approach

The Committee has consistently argued for an international approach to dealing with electronic communication. We would like to see, for example, the establishment of a networking office and a youth forum at the European level. In addition, all Member States, as well as the EU, should ratify the Council of Europe Convention on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and abuse.

The Committee would also like to see the establishment of a European supervisory authority to consider the broader societal ramifications of the internet on a 10 to 20-year timescale. EU, national and local authorities should regularly meet with organised civil society representatives.



Harnessing the Single Market

In order to ensure that online business can flourish, there must be a level playing field. Rules must be fair and advertising and marketing appropriately regulated. The Committee therefore wants online businesses to provide clearer information about their identities, and better terms and conditions covering online transactions to be put in place.

More transparent and secure payment mechanisms are also needed. The EESC wants to see governments, businesses and consumers working together to enable the EU to complete its internal market online.

Untangling legal questions

The era of electronic communication may have benefitted civil society immensely, but it also created a legal headache when it comes to issues such as copyright, data protection and privacy. The Committee believes that a balance between protecting certain fundamental rights and freedoms and enabling the free flow of information needs to be found. The EESC strongly supports the principle that individuals have the right to control their personal information.

Furthermore, the Committee would like to see a unitary European Copyright Code to help consolidate the harmonisation between Member States' legislation. Alternative regulatory approaches should also be considered, including self-regulation and industry codes of good practice.

The Committee has played a crucial role in driving these issues onto the European agenda. You will find a selection of landmark EESC opinions over the next few pages.



Setting the agenda

Every one of the EESC's opinions includes concrete proposals. The following 12 are the most representative of the Committee's views on the most pressing issues concerning internet use.

Protecting children online

PREVENTING RISK

The EESC strongly agrees with the Commission that all children in Europe should have the opportunity to develop safer online skills. The Committee would like to see the following taken into consideration:

- A comprehensive strategy to strengthen risk prevention and empower children online
- Stringent rules and sanctions to protect data and privacy and to combat child pornography
- Specific and binding obligations for parties involved in online advertising, to address the physical and psychological risks to children

EESC Opinion on "The European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children" (2012)

Rapporteur: Mr Antonio Longo, Group III "Various Interests", Italy

ENSURING SAFER SURFING

The EESC would like to see issues concerning advertising aimed at young people and children to be placed within an EU framework. This framework should take the following considerations into account:

- A universal minimum age for advertising specifically aimed at children
- Special emphasis on empowering, informing and educating children on how to interpret advertising messages
- Public information and training to help families protect children more effectively
- Possible self-regulation and co-regulation initiatives by advertisers and sponsors
- Possible cross-cutting measures to more effectively guarantee children's rights

EESC Opinion on "A framework for advertising aimed at young people and children" (2012)

Rapporteur: Mr Jorge Pegado Liz, Group III "Various Interests", Portugal



PREVENTION THE KEY

The EESC strongly believes that prevention is the key to the protection of children. In this respect, the Committee has proposed the following:

- All Member States, as well as the EU, should sign and ratify the Council of Europe Convention on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and abuse and the optional protocol to the UN Convention on the rights of the child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography
- The EU should implement a prevention strategy against child sexual abuse

EESC Opinion on “Preventive measures for the protection of children against sexual abuse” (2011)
Rapporteur: Ms Madi Sharma, Group I “Employers”, United Kingdom

AN INTERNATIONAL APPROACH

The Committee has praised the work already done on protecting children online. An international partnership approach is now needed, and the EESC has recommended the following:

- Raising awareness on specific topics such as grooming and cyber-bullying
- Harmonising legal frameworks across Member States
- Establishing a networking office, an experts panel and a youth forum at the European level

EESC Opinion on “Establishing a multiannual Community programme on protecting children using the internet and other communication technologies” (2008)

Rapporteur: Ms Madi Sharma, Group I “Employers”, United Kingdom

More responsible networking

EXAMINING SOCIAL NETWORKS

There needs to be more emphasis on the responsible use of social networks. The Committee has recommended the following:

- Adoption of binding and non-binding supra-national measures that would lead to self or co-regulation
- Regular assessment of self-regulation measures
- Awareness-raising campaigns, and specific courses on parental supervision
- Better protection of the right to privacy in the workplace
- An EU Code of Online Rights (digital rights)

EESC Opinion on “The responsible use of social networks and the prevention of related problems” (2012)
Rapporteur: Mr Bernardo Hernández Bataller, Group III “Various Interests”, Spain



SAFER NETWORKING

The EESC is well aware of the importance of SNS to many aspects of modern life. However, it is also aware of the need to address certain risks linked to their illegal and abusive use. With this in mind, the Committee has called for some extra measures to be put in place. These include:

- Possibility of establishing co-regulation mechanisms
- Early education of young Europeans about SNS
- The drafting of a Green Paper on SNS , examining their cultural, social and economic implications
- Appointment of an EU-level Ombudsman (human dignity, privacy and data protection)
- Better coordination of policies at the national level

EESC Opinion on “The impact of social networking sites on citizens/consumers” (2009)

Rapporteur: Mr Jorge Pegado Liz, Group III “Various Interests”, Portugal

Fighting illegal activities

PUSHING ELECTRONIC IDENTIFICATION

The EESC has welcomed the Commission’s proposal for a Regulation on electronic identification (eID), for electronic transactions in the internal market. The opinion noted that several of the Committee’s earlier recommendations were incorporated into the proposal.

The EESC would now like to see:

- The introduction of a standardised eID on a voluntary basis, which would respect the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality
- An awareness-raising campaign, concerning cross-border eID and e-signature arrangements, in order to address citizens’ privacy and security concerns

EESC Opinion on “Electronic identification and trust services for electronic transactions in the internal market” (2012)

Rapporteur: Mr Thomas McDonogh, Group I “Employers”, Ireland



AGAINST ILLEGAL GAMBLING

The Committee agrees that the fight against illegal gambling activities is common to all EU Member States. The EU should create binding consumer protection legislation that addresses this issue. EU-level activity should include:

- A study to determine the specific profile of addiction in gambling, and what if any measures are required
- Strict regulation concerning the prohibition of gambling advertising aimed at minors or including minors/people under national age limits for gambling
- A system of infringements and penalties
- Guarantees to ensure that online gambling activities do not impact on employment in the land-based gambling sector

EESC Opinion on “Online gambling in the internal market” (2011)

Rapporteur: Mr Stefano Mallia, Group I “Employers”, Malta

Supporting the Digital Agenda

PERSONAL DATA

The EESC believes that more needs to be done to ensure the protection of personal data. The Committee, consequently, would like to stress some important points:

- Individuals have the right to enjoy effective control over their personal information, and this right should be extended
- Policy approaches should be in line with the real needs and expectations of the public
- Search engines, storage space providers, and cloud computing software should come within the scope of the regulation, when data on users is collected for commercial ends. The same should apply to personal information on social networking sites

EESC Opinion on “The protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free flow of such data (General Data Protection Regulation)” (2012)

Rapporteur: Mr Jorge Pegado Liz, Group III “Various Interests”, Portugal



DEFINING ONLINE COPYRIGHT

The EESC feels that copyright is not an absolute right, and that respect for copyright cannot be enforced through general filtering of the internet by service providers. Therefore:

- Libraries and bodies managing audiovisual works should not be encumbered by excessive tightening of copyright legislation
- Some excessively restrictive national rules should be revised so as not to impede the development of online distribution of audiovisual works
- The Commission should make detailed proposals for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) involved in cultural and artistic efforts, so that they can participate in the Single Market for online distribution of audiovisual content
- A unitary European Copyright Code could help to harmonise Member State legislation
- The Commission could draft a White Paper on further steps to establish a Single European Market in audiovisual works across linguistic barriers

EESC Opinion on "The online distribution of audiovisual works in the European Union: opportunities and challenges towards a digital Single Market" (2012)

Rapporteur: Mr Jacques Lemerrier, Group II "Workers", France

REMOVING OBSTACLES

Citizens should be encouraged to overcome their unfamiliarity with online technology. The Committee wants to see digital literacy, e-skills and e-learning promoted. This could be achieved by:

- Better access to online tools
- Meetings between authorities and organised civil society representatives to identify real needs
- Encouraging enthusiasm among citizens when it comes to e-inclusion and lifelong learning

EESC Opinion on "Enhancing digital literacy, e-skills and e-inclusion" (2011)

Rapporteur: Ms Laure Batut, Group II "Workers", France



FREE FLOW OF INFORMATION

The EESC understands the importance of finding a balance between protecting people's fundamental rights and freedoms, and not restricting the free flow of personal data between Member States. Therefore, the Committee would like to encourage:

- An appropriate revision of the Data Protection Directive in order to strengthen legislation regulating business activity
- More consistent protection of workers' personal data throughout the EU through a European framework to strengthen legal clarity and certainty
- The appointment of an independent Company Data Protection Officer and harmonisation of related rules concerning his/her tasks and competences
- The establishment of an EU authority to consider the broader societal ramifications of the internet on a 10 to 20-year timescale

EESC Opinion on "A comprehensive approach on personal data protection in the European Union" (2011)
Rapporteur: Mr Peter Morgan, Group I "Employers", United Kingdom

Join the debate!

The EESC wants to build upon these opinions, engage with more civil society partners and encourage the take-up of its key recommendations. The opportunities presented by electronic communication must be grasped. For these objectives to be realised four key areas need to be addressed.

International cooperation

Should regulation in the field of safer internet use be the responsibility of national audiovisual regulators, national electronic communications regulators or regulators with specific powers at European level? This is a conversation that needs to take place. Should national laws for press, radio and TV apply to the online environment, or should specific rules be developed? Can a European approach be successful?



Fundamental rights

Striking a balance between fundamental rights, like freedom of expression and good communication on the one hand and the protection of personal dignity and privacy on the other, remains at the core of this debate. What can be said in the name of freedom of expression in an online environment? And should such freedom through the internet be total, with no restrictions?

Opportunities and Challenges

Much of the potential of the internet remains untapped. More and more people are frequently online, creating opportunities in e-commerce, e-learning and flexible working. There is a negative side however, with issues such as online fraud, cyber-bullying and offensive content. How can Europe overcome these challenges without undermining the opportunities?

Alternative Regulatory Approaches

Are alternative regulatory approaches now required? Is the internet simply a new conduit for existing societal dangers and risks, or is increased regulatory intervention necessary to protect vulnerable groups? Are self-regulatory measures and codes of good practice sufficient for preventing abuse, or is new regulation needed? These are issues for citizens to discuss, and ultimately, decide.

The EESC wants to hear your views on all these questions. The Committee will take account of this public feedback when making suggestions and recommendations to EU decision-makers. You can get involved and join the debate at:

www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.events-and-activities-internet-responsible-use-forum



List of opinions

EESC Opinion on “The European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children” (CESE 1518/2012)

EESC Opinion on “A framework for advertising aimed at young people and children” (CESE 138/2012)

EESC Opinion on “Preventive measures for the protection of children against sexual abuse” (CESE 1593/2011)

EESC Opinion on “Establishing a multiannual Community programme on protecting children using the internet and other communication technologies” (CESE 986/2008)

EESC Opinion on “The responsible use of social networks and the prevention of related problems” (CESE 465/2012)

EESC Opinion on “The impact of social networking sites on citizens/consumers” (CESE 1697/2009)

EESC Opinion on “Electronic identification and trust services for electronic transactions in the internal market” (CESE 1243/2012)

EESC Opinion on “Online gambling in the internal market” (CESE 1581/2011)

EESC Opinion on “The protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free flow of such data (General Data Protection Regulation)” (CESE1303/2012)

EESC Opinion on “The online distribution of audiovisual works in the European Union: opportunities and challenges towards a digital Single Market” (CESE 467/2012)

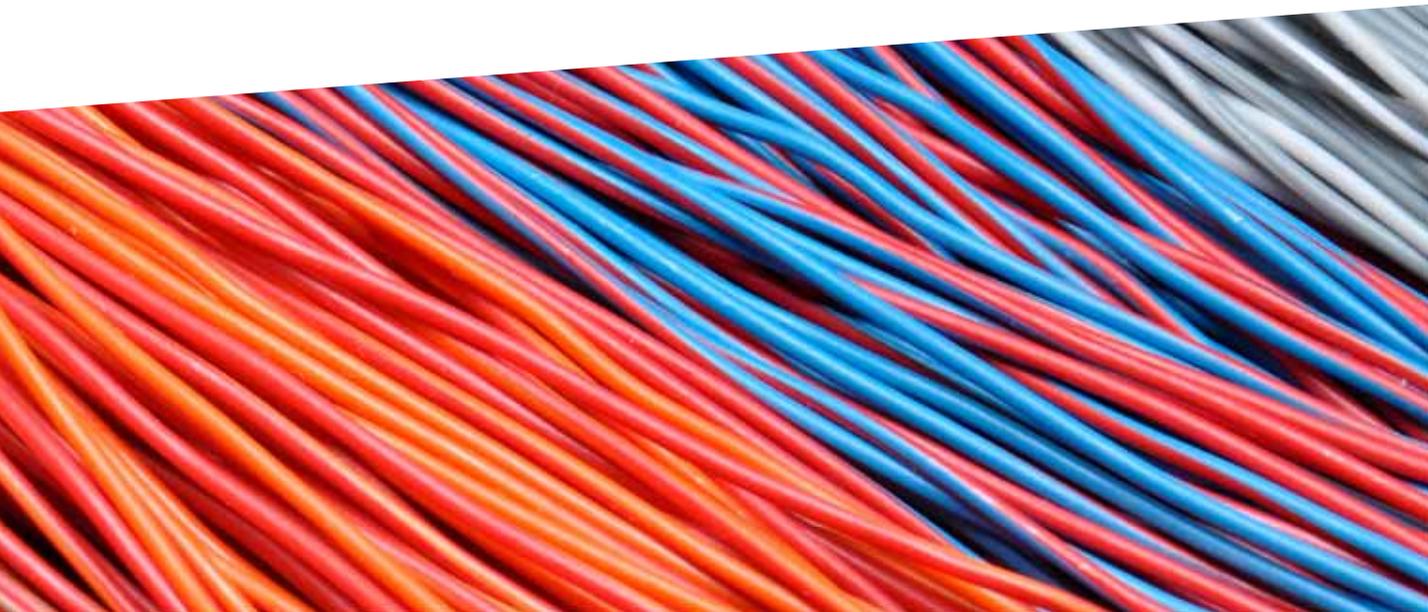
EESC Opinion on “Enhancing digital literacy, e-skills and e-inclusion” (CESE 1182/2011)

EESC Opinion on “A comprehensive approach on personal data protection in the European Union” (CESE 999/2011)

Link to the opinions on the web:

www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.events-and-activities-internet-responsible-use-opinions

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