

## **Consumers benefit from new Media landscape**

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In an ever changing technological world, Europe faces an urgent need to reshape its economy and society to reflect the realities and challenges of the communications revolution. Adjusting to the changing economic realities brought about by globalisation of markets and the ever faster pace of technological change is indeed a must. It is true that most Europeans are very proud of the GSM success leading on to developments in MMS and 3G networks, the widespread use of broadband internet and mobility, the broadband boom, the success of flat screens together with the development of digital TV capped by Internet TV and TV on mobile phones. Yet, the European Union is widely aware of the new convergence of TV, telecommunications and entertainment as potential contributors to the European economy.

The rapid technological developments laid down in the early 1980s saw the birth of private TV and radio stations all over Western Europe. Hence, the need for a Television Without Frontiers Directive which was launched in 1989 and which set out minimum standards applicable in all Member States. The advertising boom, particularly through teleshopping paved the way for a revised version of the Directive. As cable and satellite television became the norm of the day, more specialty channels emerged, including channels entirely devoted to advertising.

The European Commission recognises that advertising through the latest and most sophisticated technologically media has a fair share in spending relative to GDP and therefore plays an integral role in the economic development and competitiveness goals set out by the Lisbon Agenda. Henceforth, the ever growing need for a revised Television Without Frontiers Directive. Before the technological boom, viewers only had two or three general entertainment channels in each country. Nowadays, one has an array of channels to choose from, zapping away from those that transmit too much advertising. Greater choice for viewers and control calls for more flexible regulation, which in turn guarantees that free-to-air channels can better flourish in a media landscape where there is increasing competition for advertising revenues.

The Directive strikes a fair balance between limiting the amount of advertising, and the nature and timing of adverts. Advertising will remain restricted to 12 minutes in any given hour and films, current affairs programmes and news cannot be interrupted by adverts more than once for each period of 30 minutes, while being open to new forms of advertising, such as split-screen, virtual or interactive advertising. Only children's programmes over 30 minutes' duration may be interrupted by one break in each 30-minute period.

Besides, applying common rules aimed at television advertising, this Directive also sets out to regulate the production of audiovisual programmes while protecting minors and human dignity. Furthermore, the Directive also stipulates that minors are to be protected from advertising of unhealthy food products, which further enhances the Commission's efforts in the promotion of a healthier lifestyle with the intent of campaigning against the alarming growth of obesity among Europeans. The advertising industry and service providers will be held accountable.

Therefore, consumers are being put at the forefront by being granted new rights by the modernised Directive, which also include the right to know what kind of content they are watching as well as a clear identification of the media service provider, improved access for people with visual or hearing impairment to audiovisual media services, and clear rules on product placement. The Directive also includes a Community mechanism allowing a "destination" Member State, in limited circumstances, to take measures against a provider established in another Member State. Co-operation between Member States in their handling of services provided across frontiers is also mandatory.

The agreement reached during the Education, Youth and Culture Council by participant Ministers ensures that while we, as European citizens, can travel freely from one EU Member State to another enjoying all the rights of a free internal market, so can we now, as viewers, through this Directive enjoy TV broadcasts from all over Europe. The Directive is expected to enter into force before the end of this year, while Member States will be given 24 months to transpose the new provisions into national law. The resultant legal framework for audiovisual services will be fully operational in 2009.

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