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RESEARCH: Moving into top gear

A joint effort without precedent on the part of the European Community's 12 member states and 9,000 million ECU*: this is what is needed if the Community is to keep up with the leaders in science and technology. No individual member state, not even the biggest, can meet the challenge of the new technologies on its own. This was underlined by the European Research Commissioner, Karl-Heinz Narjes, when he presented to the press the Commission's guidelines for the second Community framework programme of technological research and development for 1987-91.

The first framework programme, which the EC ministers adopted in July 1983 has enabled the launching of such research programmes as ESPRIT, RACE and BRITE and has led to concrete results in several areas. But the Commission wants the Community to move into top gear for the next stage, because its capacity to generate more wealth, remain or become competitive and, especially, create more jobs, depend on it.

Some figures given by Mr Narjes are frankly disturbing. While the United States is preparing to spend 1,000 billion ECU on R & D in the years 1987-91, and Japan envisages an expenditure of 330 billion ECU, the Twelve, whose population exceeds that of the U.S. and is nearly three times as large as the Japanese, expect to spend 430 billion ECU, including 230 billion ECU of public money.

The European Commission wants to give priority to developing competitiveness in industry and the services and proposes an expenditure of over five billion ECU for this purpose. Information technology would get over two billion of this, telecommunications just under two billion, the more traditional industries around 700 million and biotechnology and agro-industrial technology some 400 million.

The two other major themes of the projected European research programme would be improving the quality of life - health and environmental protection, greater security - and bringing about a research workers' Europe. At the same time research into nuclear as well as alternative sources of energy would continue.

The Commission wants to make use of all its possibilities - those it already has as well as those now provided by the up-dated Treaty of Rome, the Community's revised "constitution" - to develop scientific and technological cooperation between companies, researchers, countries and regions of the Community.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.67 or IR£ 0.71.

MONEY: How much is it in ECU?

You can do it in Britain and the three Benelux countries - Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. But in Germany you would be violating a law dating back to 1948. The activity in question is opening a bank account in ECU. Although it is the currency invented by the European Community, most member states are unwilling to let you and me open an ECU account.

The ECU is a very special currency, of course. Technically, it is a "basket" unit, based on a certain quantity of each Community currency. While you can now buy ECU travellers cheques, you must pay for them in your own currency.

The EC keeps its own accounts in ECU. The European Commission in fact wants member states to make it easier for private individuals to use the ECU. At present people resident in Germany can deposit ECUs with a bank - but abroad. And residents of Denmark can hold ECU deposits with a domestic bank for three months.

There are two basic reasons for encouraging the use of the ECU. It is yet another step towards a People's Europe. And it cuts down exchange risks.

AID: Not only for emergencies but also for long-term problems

Fire recently swept through a suburb of Rangoon, Burma, leaving some 20,500 people homeless. The event went unnoticed over here. But a week later the European Commission had decided on emergency aid of 100,000 ECU*. At the same time it also undertook to supply 500 tonnes of vegetable oil to displaced persons in the Philippines, to be distributed by the International Committee of the Red Cross.

But the European Community also uses emergency aid to solve more long-term problems. Where food aid is sold to the local population, the counterpart funds it generates are used to finance projects aimed at helping the rural population. This is happening in Nicaragua, as the European Commission recently told a Belgian Euro-MP, Pol Marck, in reply to his question on development aid to that country.

It noted that the counterpart funds arising from 7 million ECU of food aid granted last year will be used, as in the past, mainly for projects to increase agricultural production and improve living conditions of the poorest farmers. Community aid, the Commission pointed out, is making an appreciable contribution to the Government's policy of helping the rural poor.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.67 or IR£ 0.71.

TECHNOLOGY: Information on materials? Ask your computer.

From early next year engineers, materials specialists in industry and company managers will be able to get all the information they want on materials, including iron and steel, alloys, plastics, ceramics and high temperature materials, at the touch of a button - thanks to the European Commission.

Information on industrial materials is necessary for technological innovation. But such information must be both up-to-date and quickly accessible. Which is where information technology and databanks come in. Databanks specializing in industrial materials already exist in Germany, France, Britain and the European Community's Joint Research Centre. But users have not been altogether happy because each databank has its own language and characteristics.

In the framework of its 1984-88 programme on the development of the specialized information market in the European Community, the Commission has undertaken to develop a Community-wide system of databanks specializing in industrial materials. The projected network will cover a very wide field, ranging from steel and glass to rubber and plastics, not forgetting materials for the electrical and electronics industries. It will provide information on their properties, resistance to corrosion and reliability.

The first stage of this ambitious programme will result in a demonstrator programme, to be launched next year. It will integrate most European operational databanks in such a way as to provide more comprehensive services and easier access, even for those with no experience of computers.

TECHNOLOGY: Europe in the race for new materials

The European Community has not limited its ambitions to developing information on industrial materials; it is also taking an active part in research into advanced materials. Karl-Heinz Narjes, the European Research Commissioner, has just signed, on the Commission's behalf, the Memorandum adopted by the major Western nations with a view to implementing the VAMAS project*.

Born at the Versailles Summit of the 7 Western nations in 1982, VAMAS aims at promoting the use of advanced materials in new technology products. It seeks to do this by encouraging research leading to standards applicable to such materials.

* Versailles Project on Advanced Materials and Standards.

LANGUAGES: A rose by any other name ... ?

A small black box is likely to make travel in foreign parts easier and more enjoyable. The box - actually it could be any colour you fancy - would translate the foreigner's gibberish into your own particular brand of it. Although the box has not yet been invented, one of its key elements is almost ready, thanks in part to the European Community.

This vision of a world in which language barriers have crumbled was evoked by C. Jansen van Rosendaal, a director in the European Commission, when he opened the World Systran Conference in Luxembourg recently. Systran is perhaps the most advanced system of machine translation which exists today. It was acquired by the Commission some 10 years ago to almost universal scepticism.

The multilingual Community had no choice but to investigate the possibilities of machine translation (MT) if it was to keep up with the flow of papers of all kinds waiting to be translated into all its official languages. The MT system which it acquired from its inventor, Dr Peter Toma in 1977 was still in its infancy.

The time, effort and money the Commission put into developing Systran are beginning to pay off. Of the two Systran systems available today one has been largely developed by the European Commission, the other by the Americans (major U.S. users include the Government and IBM).

MT, as the Commission's Ian Pigott told the Conference, "has passed from dream to reality". One of its major advantages, the head of a commercial translation service pointed out, is that whereas flesh and blood translators do not like working under pressure, MT is available 24 hours a day, with instant correction, revision and transmission possibilities.

MT has its limitations, of course. "Oratory", as one translator noted, "is out because it is at the warm end of the emotional scale". MT could even be "positively dangerous" in the case of speeches of Euro-MPs. "For the moment their style is beyond Systran", was how he put it.

The world-wide use of Systran is beginning to pose problems. One of the most important is the lack of compatibility between the various systems developed by users on their own (in major corporations, for example). One of the main aims of the Conference, which was organized by the Commission and attended by experts from most industrialized countries, was to encourage cooperation between users to ensure compatibility.

SOCIETY: Looking at Europe's quality of life in figures

The 12-nation European Community is second only to the United States in terms of wealth as measured by Gross Domestic Product. The Community had a GDP of 2,600 billion ECU* and the U.S. one of 3,700 billion ECU in 1983, according to the Community's statistical office**. But how do they compare in their quality of life?

The statistical office does not publish a Quality of Life Index. But its pocket-size volume on the EC's basic statistics contains information helpful for this purpose. In the older 10-nation Community there were 1,010 hospital beds and 210 doctors for every 100,000 inhabitants in 1981. The corresponding figures for the U.S. were 630 and 168, while Japan was better off in terms of hospital beds (1,160) but well down as regards the number of its doctors (118).

As might have been expected, Japan was ahead as regards television sets and telephones. There were 37 television sets per 100 inhabitants in the Community in 1982 but as many as 56 in Japan. The gap was much narrower in the case of telephones - 49 per 100 inhabitants for the EC in 1983 as against 52 for Japan.

Whether a high level of meat consumption adds to the quality of life is perhaps less evident today. While consumption of beef and veal amounted to 24 kgs. per person in the EC (in 1983), it was twice as high in the U.S. (51 kgs.) but only 4 kgs. in Japan.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.67 or IR£ 0.71.

** Basic Statistics of the Community, 23d Edition.

POPULATION: Keeping up with the Soviet Union

The 10-nation European Community had a population of 272 million in 1983. This was equal to the population of the Soviet Union. But by the year 2000 it would have fallen well behind but for the entry of Spain and Portugal. Thanks to them, the 12-nation Community should have a total population of 331 million in the year 2000 as compared to 315 million for the Soviet Union, according to estimates published by the EC's statistical office*.

The fact is that birth rates in the Community are well below the Soviet Union's, with one exception. Ireland had a birth rate of 1.9 per hundred population in 1983, which was only fractionally lower than the 2.0 per hundred recorded in the Soviet Union. Elsewhere in the EC birth rates ranged from a low 0.9 (Denmark and Germany) to 1.5 (Portugal). Moralists may claim the Soviet Union's higher marriage rate (10.4 per 1,000 population, compared to 6 per 1,000 in Germany) had something to do with this.

* Basic Statistics of the Community, 23d Edition.

TRAVEL: Are customs officials too noseey?

Questioning people is part of a customs official's job. But under European Community law he cannot ask just any question of citizens of a member state, according to the European Commission.

It was replying to a Euro-MP, George Patterson, who wanted to know whether a French customs official had the right to ask people leaving the country for another member state about their occupation before retirement. The Commission thought "there was no justification" for such a question.

It took the view that customs officials must only make sure that the person belongs to one of the categories allowed to move freely between member states under Community law: employees, self-employed persons, such "recipients of services" as tourists and retired people.

All of them have a right to live in the country in which they have worked for at least the 12 months prior to retirement and have lived in it continuously for more than three years.

Customs officials cannot ask more detailed questions nor ask for documents other than an identity card or passport. They are mainly responsible, however, for applying their country's laws, including its exchange controls. But that is another matter.

RIGHT OF RESIDENCE: It's guaranteed, but not unconditionally, in the EC

A European Community country cannot deny the right of residence to a migrant worker from another member state, but it can ask him to obtain a residence permit every five years. This, in substance, is the European Commission's reply to four German Euro-MPs, who questioned it about the problems of Adolfo Ghiani.

Ghiani is an Italian who has been working in Nuremberg, Germany, since 1960. His residence permit, issued for an unlimited period, was withdrawn by the municipal authorities on the grounds that he was active in an association of Italian migrant workers known to have links with the Italian Communist Party.

The Commission has pointed out that as long as Mr Ghiani was issued a residence permit for a national of a Community member state, which is valid for five years and automatically renewable, his right of residence had not been infringed under Community regulations.

MEDICINES: Euro-MPs want Community action to protect consumers

Travel and technology are creating the conditions for a genuine common market. Television commercials aimed at consumers in one country are often watched by viewers in neighbouring ones. And even if the product advertised is not available in these countries, consumers can pick it up on their travels abroad.

A number of Euro-MPs, concerned at the dangers to consumers in the case of pharmaceutical products, have expressed their concern to the European Commission. Mrs Raymonde Dury, of Belgium, has pointed to the fact that the rules governing publicity for such products are "totally different" from one member state to another.

She also noted that instructions accompanying medicines can be contradictory. Mrs Dury has drawn the Commission's attention to the case of Optalidon. It cannot be given in France to children under five, according to the leaflet which accompanies it, but it can in Belgium to children over two. An Italian Euro-MP, Mario di Bartolomei, has noted that several medicines exported from Germany contain instructions in German only.

The fact is that publicity for medicinal products is covered by Community law. Moreover, since last November member states must approve a detailed summary of the characteristics of each product approved by them. This will make it easier for them to keep a check on misleading advertising, as they will be required to do under a Council Directive which comes into force this October.

The Commission obviously shares the concern over the divergent information given consumers for the same medicament in the different member states. It notes that the instructions supplied with a medicine must be approved by the competent authorities in each member state. But the Commission believes that a central regulatory body is needed to ensure uniformity.

As most member states are opposed to this, increased coordination of national decisions is necessary, in the Commission's view, until such time as there is a genuine internal market for pharmaceuticals. Meanwhile, it expects the November 1985 Directive to lead to greater uniformity than in the past.

As for instructions which are in one language only, the Commission has pointed out that under a 1975 Council Directive the contents of any leaflet included with a proprietary medicine must be approved by the importing member state - which implies that it must be drafted in the language in use in that country.

SMOKING: Are Europeans starting to kick the habit?

Europeans are smoking less since 1980 - after having steadily increased their tobacco consumption during the 1960s and 1970s, according to a report on smoking in the 10-nation European Community just published by the European Commission*. The report also reveals that filter-tipped cigarettes are gaining in popularity and that far more men than women smoke.

Europeans bought nearly 480 billion cigarettes in 1982. This figure may seem astronomic; but in 1975 and 1980 sales exceeded 500 billion. Consumption has fallen in most countries - by as much as 26% in the U.K. between 1973 and 1983. Elsewhere it continues to rise steadily - as in Greece and Italy and, if to a lesser extent, France and Denmark.

Consumption per head is highest in the poorest countries. In Greece and Ireland it is over 2,600 cigarettes a year for people over 15. The Danes and Dutch smoke fewer than 2,000 cigarettes per head and the number varies between 2,100 and 2,300 elsewhere in the Community.

In 1982 over 80% of all cigarettes sold were filter-tipped. The proportion was as much as 94% in the U.K., Greece and Italy in 1983. Filter-tipped cigarettes, considered less dangerous to health, accounted for 89% of sales in Germany and Ireland, and 84% in Belgium, in 1982.

But filters are scorned in the Netherlands, Denmark and France, where they accounted for 69%, 65% and 64% of sales respectively. But even in these countries filters are gaining ground. In 1970 untipped cigarettes accounted for 2/3 of all sales in France and the Netherlands and over half the sales in Denmark.

But everywhere smoking is essentially a masculine vice. Even so, in the Netherlands, Ireland and Denmark nearly half the smokers are women.

* Medicine: Statistics of Smoking in the Member States of the European Community by Geoffrey Todd.