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TELEVISION: Keeping Europe in the race for satellite broadcasting

The dissensions within the European Community, due to two competing systems of colour television - the German PAL and French SECAM - will have taught the Community a lesson. The twelve EC ministers responsible for the internal market have agreed that the European standard for direct broadcasting by satellite will be based on European systems.

They have followed the advice of the European Commission, in fact, which has been urging them for over a year not to repeat past mistakes. Hence the decision to use MAC packet systems, developed in the Community.

The MAC systems, recommended by the Commission, can be made compatible with each other. They have been developed by leading European electronic companies and the European Broadcasting Union, which includes Community as well as other West European countries.

The MAC packet allows the onward transmission by cable of programmes sent by satellites. This is a considerable advantage for Europe, given its growing network of cables for the distribution of television programmes.

The experts must now translate the agreement reached by the EC Council of Ministers into a European standard, which would then remain in force until the end of 1991.

The agreement marks yet another step towards the creation of a single internal market by the end of 1992. It favours both European manufacturers and the emergent European television and telecommunications community.

The next stage is that of the new high-definition television. Japanese attempts to impose their standards were blocked by the Europeans at the meeting of the UN International Consultative Committee on Radio in Dubrovnik last May. The ICCR has given itself a two-year breathing space, which the Community must now put to use to develop - and eventually impose - its own standards, at the embryonic stage as yet.

The Community research programme RACE and a special EUREKA project will come in useful here.

REGIONAL AID: ECU 285 million* for economic development

New roads and dams, factories which will be modernized and thousands of jobs: this, very briefly, is the promise of the ECU 285 million, representing the fourth allocation for 1986 of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which the European Commission has just released.

Some ECU 21 million will go to support investments in industry, the craft industries and services, contributing directly to the creation, or safeguarding, of 2,400 jobs, including nearly 1,200 in Germany, 800 in the UK and over 450 in Spain. Among the projects receiving ERDF money is one for the modernisation of the factories of Fibreglass Limited in Wales and another for the construction of a ring road around Cork.

The remainder, some ECU 263 million, will be used to finance infrastructure investments. The lion's share (ECU 142 million) will fund the construction of six dams in Spain. Other infrastructure projects include a stretch of motorway in Italy and four secondary schools and a technical college in Greece. Work on these projects will create new, if temporary, jobs; but once they are completed, they will give rise to permanent jobs.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.63 or IR£ 0.71.

MOTORING: Numberplates aren't enough on the Continent

If you're planning to take your car abroad, check the back of it first - and not just to see if the stop lights are working. The fact is that any vehicle entering a foreign country must be branded with the letters identifying its country of registration. Without the regulation GB or IRL, car and driver can be turned back, even at the Community's internal frontiers.

This is not because of any Community regulation, as the European Commission told a Belgian Euro-MP, Jaak Vandemeulebroucke. The latter had drawn its attention to the case of a Belgian motorist who was refused entry into the Federal Republic of Germany because his car sported the letters VL, for Flanders*, rather than the obligatory B.

The law which governs such matters, the Commission pointed out, is international: it is the Final Act of the UN conference on motor vehicles, signed in Vienna in 1968.

* Vlaanderen in Flemish.

REGIONAL AID: ECU 230 million* for economic reconversion

Nearly a dozen disadvantaged regions of the European Community will be able to make a fresh start, thanks to the more than ECU 230 million which they are to receive from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

The Italian Mezzogiorno, East Flanders in Belgium and Southern Luxembourg are among the regions to benefit from the European Commission's decision. They are regions which have been hit by either the crisis in traditional industries or the European Community's recent enlargement. This is why they are entitled to the "specific" measures financed by the ERDF, and which are in addition to its more general programme of aid to disadvantaged regions (see p. 3).

These "specific" measures represent contributions from the Community's budget to the aid programmes drawn up by the national authorities and approved by the European Commission. Invented in 1980, they exist in their present form since 1984.

Among the six specific measures now announced, two concern regions effected by enlargement. They are the Italian Mezzogiorno (ECU 96.2 million) and three regions in the southwest of France (ECU 71.6 million).

In both cases, roughly half the funds will be used to encourage small- and medium-sized enterprises and craft industries. The former are to be helped through market research, better management, access to venture capital, investment finance and technological innovation. Nearly one-fourth of the funds will go on promoting rural tourism, by adapting local accommodation and tourist publicity.

Two regions hit by the crisis in the textile industry are also receiving ERDF money. They are centred on Lille in northern France (ECU 28.6 million) and in the Flanders region of Belgium (ECU 5.6 million). The ERDF is also helping two regions with declining steel industries. They are in the Calais region of France (ECU 21 million) and in southern Luxembourg (ECU 9 million).

The funds provided by the ERDF will be used in all four regions to reconvert abandoned industrial sites and to encourage small- and medium-sized firms, by making available the services they need.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.63 or IR£ 0.71.

ENVIRONMENT: Cleaning up the environment needs basic research

Protecting the environment has emerged as a major challenge facing the international community. This is not simply because pollution knows no frontiers; demand for firewood is destroying forests faster than acid rain. But research is needed to find the means of preventing and correcting the harmful effects of human activities on the environment.

The 12-nation European Community has recently adopted three new programmes, covering environmental protection, climatology and major technological hazards. The research, to be spread over the period 1986-90, will cost ECU 75 million*. Earlier programmes helped make the paper and textile industries "cleaner" and led to much greater cooperation at the European level.

Research into acid rain is to be stepped up. While some aspects of it are now clear, much work remains to be done before acid rain is fully understood. Research is also being undertaken to determine the effects of small concentrations of heavy metals, for example, on human health and the environment.

Research on climatology will continue to focus on the impact which such activities as clearing forests and burning fossil fuels are having on the climate. The major technological hazards to be studied are those connected with the chemical and petrochemical industries, with the aim of preventing another Seveso or Bhopal.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.63 or IR£ 0.71.

INDUSTRY: Robots can help revive declining industries

Saving smokestack industries means saving jobs. And this is where BRITE comes in. It is the European Community's programme of basic research in industrial technologies. It has just added eight new projects for joint funding by the EC and the firms, research institutions and universities actually doing the research.

This brings the total to 103 projects. The new ones involve the use of high technology in basic industrial processes - such as computers to control the continuous dyeing of textiles, a laser-robot system for automatic welding under production line conditions and the automatic loading of sewing machines.

Advance notice of the second call for proposals has now been published in the EC's Official Journal (No C153 of June 19). This is to give small and medium-sized enterprises, in particular, time to draw up their proposals to find suitable European partners. The European Commission has prepared an Information Package to help them, to be obtained from Division XII-C-I, 200 rue de la Loi, B-1049 Brussels, Belgium.

ENERGY: Why industry must learn to "manage" energy

European industry can reduce its energy consumption by one-fourth - or roughly 60 million tonnes of oil equivalent (tep) - by 1990, simply by using energy more efficiently. But the 12 European Community governments will have to do more to encourage firms to save energy. This is the viewpoint, not of a Western expert following the last oil shock, but of the European Commission, and put forward by it at a time of falling oil prices.

The fact is that the fall in prices is unlikely to last - and in any case prices will never fall to the point where oil is free. But in the 12-nation Community industry accounts for nearly one-third of the EC's energy requirements. If petroleum products used by the chemical industry are included, the figure rises to 42%. In 1984 industry's total consumption came to over 280 million tep - hence the Commission's special report, entitled "Towards a European policy for energy efficiency in industrial firms".

Industry has been saving energy since the first oil shock. Between 1975 and 1983 it cut back consumption by 24% per unit of output. Neither agriculture nor transport saved as much. However, in 1984 consumption rose by 2%, following the recovery in the steel and chemical industries.

Why does European industry not attach more importance to energy conservation? The two main reasons, in the Commission's view, are an absence of information and a reluctance to invest in this area. The present trend in oil prices may well be a third reason.

The Commission notes that most company directors have only the vaguest idea of the energy requirements of their factory or workshop. Nor are they better informed on ways of saving energy. Most of them, whether managers, engineers or salesmen, never had their attention drawn to these problems during their training. The Commission's own preference, when it comes to disseminating information on energy savings, is for the energy bus, which goes to companies, and the data bank, SESAME, opened to the public on July 1.

As for the necessary investments, they are given a lower priority than investment in new machinery or in automation. But the Commission is trying to publicize new methods of financing investments in energy savings. Specialized institutions are prepared to make loans for such investments, to be repaid out of the money saved by the company.

TRADE: Will computers delay the completion of the internal market?

Pity the long-distance lorry driver, taking goods from one European Community country to another. At each internal frontier he must queue up for custom formalities. But suppose all the paperwork were to be computerized A European Commission proposal to do just this has been challenged by a Belgian Euro-MP, Ms Raymonde Dury.

She holds the introduction of computers to be in flat contradiction with the Commission's own White Paper, which provides for the abolition of customs formalities on intra-Community trade from 1992. What the Commission should be doing, she claims, is seeking ways of dismantling customs facilities at the Community's internal frontiers, not improving them.

The Commission agrees that the creation of a genuine common market presupposes the abolition of customs formalities on intra-Community trade in goods originating in the member states. But speeding up formalities meanwhile is no bad thing in its view.

Ms Dury, moreover, is wrong if she thinks customhouses will disappear with the emergence of a single internal market. They will still be needed for trade with third countries and for intra-Community trade in goods from third countries which are not in free circulation, as can happen under the provisions of the EC Treaty.

CONSUMERS: Buying on the never-never can cost more than you think

Buying on credit is fast becoming a way of life. But if it is relatively easy to get credit, finding out its true cost is much more difficult. An Irish Euro-MP, Thomas Raftery, in fact believes that "licensed money-lenders often mislead the public about the real interest of loans". And he wants the European Community to harmonize legal arrangements in this area, as money is often lent across internal frontiers.

The European Commission has been trying since 1979 to get the member states to adopt a directive requiring credit institutions to tell prospective borrowers the interest rate and other charges. Its proposal also provides for the setting up of a uniform method of calculating the global rate, which would be specified in all credit agreements and advertising material. The method used in the U.K., the Netherlands and shortly in Ireland seems the most acceptable. The Commission's proposal covers only credit institutions. Other lending agencies are being discussed in an EC Working Party just now.

SOCIETY: Euro-MPs vote omnibus resolution on violence against women

It is not easy to measure the scale and extent of violence to which women are subject in the European Community; such records as exist are fragmentary and "do not reveal the full dimension of this social problem". But it is a problem which is "taking on extremely critical and serious forms, such as group violence".

Thus the European Parliament, in its resolution on violence against women. The resolution, adopted by 197 votes to 66, with 50 abstentions, must surely rank as one of the longest on record. This is because of its very comprehensive definition of violence, (which it extends to include economic and other forms of discrimination against women), and its numerous, sometimes far-reaching, recommendations.

A key section deals with sexual violence, whether individual or group. Parliament wants all such violence to be considered a crime, with not only the victim but also the public authorities entitled to start proceedings. In addition, women's associations should have the right to bring civil action for damages, if requested by the victim.

The resolution also deals at length with violence in the home. It calls on the member governments to provide funds for reception facilities for victims of in-family and sexual violence, and on housing authorities to provide more short-term refuges. The resolution also stresses a woman's right to her own income, as a guarantee that financial dependence is no longer a reason for a woman to return to her husband.

Parliament views sexual harassment at the workplace in both human and economic terms. In fact it wants the European Commission to carry out studies to (1) assess the cost to social security agencies from illnesses due to sexual blackmail at work and (2) evaluate the relationship between loss of production and sexual blackmail.

The influx of women from developing countries is reflected in the section of the resolution dealing with women from minority groups. Parliament has reaffirmed their right to a residence permit. It also calls on national health authorities to ensure they have access to medical information in their own language - and on governments to ban the practice of female excision.

But Parliament admits that legislation by itself is not enough. Education has a key role to play, by creating a feeling of mutual responsibility and respect between the sexes. This is a viewpoint shared by the European Commission, as its Vice-President, Manuel Marin, told Parliament.

UNLEADED PETROL: Exchanging one toxic substance for another?

Lead is a versatile metal. But it is also toxic. Which is why lead pipes are no longer used to supply drinking water and lead paints cannot be used in toys infants may suck. And following a campaign led by the Greens, the European Community decided last year to make lead-free petrol available everywhere beginning in 1989.

In fact it is already available in most EC countries, although not in Ireland. Replying to a question from a Belgian Euro-MP, Willy Vernimmen, the European Commission has pointed out that while the number of stations supplying leaded petrol is very small as yet, the situation could change rapidly if governments agreed to offset even a part of the higher refining costs of unleaded petrol. The German government has already done so; as a result, Germany is well ahead with 6,000 pumps.

But the growing use of unleaded petrol has prompted another Belgian Euro-MP, Jaak Vandemeulebroucke, to set the alarm bells ringing again. He has alerted the Commission to the fact that unleaded petrol pollutes the air with cancer-producing substances "far more dangerous" than those released by leaded petrol.

In a detailed answer, the Commission has admitted to long being aware of the fact that all petrols can produce by-products which are "either toxic, carcinogenic or just noxious". The risks can be greater with unleaded petrol if the lead compounds used to improve the octane rating, and thus eliminate engine knock, are replaced by benzene.

However, only unleaded petrol, as the Commission has pointed out, allows the use of catalytic converters, which change noxious exhaust gases into water and carbon dioxide. To limit the use of benzene, the EC Council of Ministers has set a maximum of 5% by volume for all petrols.

But three-way catalytic converters, a French Euro-MP, Mrs Marie-Noëlle Lienemann, has noted, require rhodium. This is a precious metal found mainly in South Africa and the Soviet Union. The European Commission has been able to reassure Mrs Lienemann that rhodium is used in the manufacture only of three-way catalytic converters.

Industry, moreover, is trying to reduce the amount of noble metals required in catalysts. Even so, given the "unstable situation" regarding rhodium supplies, the Commission, like Parliament, believes the best hope lies in recycling this and other noble metals.