

The legal basis of the Information Society policy are Titles XV and XVI and Articles 163 to 172 of the Treaty establishing the European Community.

The communications revolution is driven by technology and market forces. The European Union has been at the heart of this process, setting the pace for opening markets, defending consumer interests and even setting technical standards.

The result for individuals and businesses is cheaper and better services of a higher quality and reliability.

Now 90% of schools and businesses in the EU are online, while more than half the population are regular internet users. The information and communications sector is among the most dynamic in the European Union and globally.

## **Preventing the digital divide**

In parallel to its work on opening markets and setting rules, the EU has been keen to ensure that citizens and businesses benefit from the achievements of the information society. One priority is to prevent a "digital divide" opening up between the richer and poorer (often outlying) EU regions with less access to the internet or new digital services.

The so-called eEurope initiative was launched in 2000. The initiative endorsed the requirements that:

- » businesses and citizens must have access to an inexpensive, world-class communications infrastructure and a wide range of services;

- » every citizen must be equipped with the skills needed to live and work in this new information society;

- » a higher priority must be given to life-long learning as a basic component of the European social model.

## **Horizon 2005: better online than in line**

Broadband access to the internet, providing fast, cheap and permanent online communications, is seen as very important. All businesses, schools and universities in the old Union members must have broadband access to the Internet by the end of 2005.

The key components of the 2005 Action Plan are what it calls eGovernment, eLearning and eHealth. The idea of eGovernment is to provide easy electronic access to 20 basic public services (filing income tax or VAT returns, registering new cars or changes in car ownership, and so on). In addition to schools and universities, the eLearning component says libraries, museums and similar institutions should also be connected to broadband networks by the end of 2005. As for eHealth, member states are to provide online health services to citizens, including information on illness prevention, online health records, teleconsultations, and electronic reimbursement of medical expenses.

The preparations for the follow-up to the eEurope initiative post-2005 are already underway and the European Commission is expected to produce a roadmap before the end of the year.