Commissioner, Digital Champions, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you here to Dublin on the occasion of this third Digital Agenda Assembly, the first one to take place outside Brussels. I would like to thank Ireland’s Telecommunications Industry Federation for hosting this evening’s reception. They are a key partner for the work we are doing here at national level towards shaping Ireland’s digital future.

Ireland’s geography has in fact given us a significant footprint in the history of communications technologies. Back in the nineteenth century, the world’s first transatlantic telegraph cable was laid in 1858 from Valentia Island off Co. Kerry to Newfoundland in Canada.

Today, of course, the submarine fibre networking the globe has become one of the defining features of our increasingly interconnected and interdependent world. So it may be difficult today to relate to just how transformative this development was at that time: reducing from days to minutes the speed of communications between Europe and America.

Further up the Irish western seaboard, Marconi’s first regular transatlantic wireless service was established in 1907 near Clifden in Co. Galway, bringing us a step closer to the ubiquitous wireless technologies of the modern digital era.

Given this transatlantic dimension, it is fitting that this week has also seen the formal launch of negotiations on a new Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) at the G8 meeting in Co. Fermanagh. There is little doubt that finalising the EU mandate at last Friday’s Trade Council will rank among our most important Presidency achievements.

We do not currently have our own EU legislation on digital media. The Commission produced its Green Paper consultation on ‘Preparing for a Fully Converged Audiovisual World’ in April. So it is sensible that we align our efforts here with taking that work forward.
The reality is that the pace of digital developments is truly astonishing. Our digital universe, as measured by the volumes of data we create and consume, continues to double around every year. It looks set to be 300 times bigger at the end of this decade that it was in the middle of the last.

Particularly striking is the idea that more data is now transmitted in a single second that existed on the entire internet just twenty years ago. We could quite easily forget that smartphones are really only a significant feature of the last five or six years; ipads and other tablets, the last three.

This digital era means it has never been as easy for a new business to increase sales internationally. Small and medium sized businesses have fallen behind their competitors and the Government, through its Action Plan for Jobs, is introducing new supports to get more businesses trading online. Minister Rabbitte will be prioritising these initiatives in 2013.

At a time of unacceptably high levels of unemployment, we also know that most net job creation will come from fast-growing young firms.

That is why there’s a clear onus on us as politicians and policy-makers to make sure that our market rules keep pace with the full extent of what’s possible here. There is something about this digital era that really puts a premium on making things as simple as possible, removing unnecessary barriers, and minimising transaction costs.

That is the essence of what good public policies and institutions are all about. So whether in the area of external trade or the Digital Single Market, I believe we really need to keep this idea at the heart of our efforts.

European leaders have set the goal of achieving a well-functioning Digital Single Market by 2015. President Van Rompuy has earmarked a dedicated discussion on digital issues for our October meeting. So I think it is helpful to see this week’s proceedings as an important milestone en route to that discussion.

The digital economy is estimated to be growing at seven times the rate of the rest of the economy, but its potential is currently held back by a patchy pan-European policy framework.

That patchy pan-European policy framework, and what we should be doing about it, maps straight across to the seven workshops in which you participated here today.

It is only through meaningful engagement with informed stakeholders that we can isolate key bottlenecks clearly, and get our policy responses right.

We managed to reach agreement on key elements of the data protection package during our Presidency term, and have made solid progress on the collective rights management, e-identification, cyber-security and web accessibility files. We also worked hard to complete the ENISA and Public Sector Information legislation.

These will all become important foundations for our Digital Single Market: coherent market rules that will support exciting new growth areas. But there is clearly more that we need to do, not least in terms of unlocking necessary investment in next generation infrastructure.

We are clearly lagging the US and Asian markets here, and by some significant margin. Estimates suggest that Europe will need investment of up to €300b over the next decade to bring our data speeds to the necessary levels.
I believe we should be very clear both that this investment is needed and that fragmented market rules are the key bottleneck. The Commission has already made proposals aimed at reducing engineering and construction costs. I understand it is now doing further work on developing a Single Telecom Market.

In Dublin Castle today we have some of the key policy makers, thinkers, champions and entrepreneurs across Europe. In your hands lies Europe’s future, because Europe’s future is digital.

I commend Commissioner Kroes and her team for their work in revamping the Digital Agenda, concentrating our attention on seven priority areas, and structuring today’s discussions towards a clearer identification of the next steps we now need to take.

Let me conclude by conveying again on behalf of the Irish Presidency my appreciation to this evening’s audience for your input to today’s workshop discussions. I have every confidence that the workshop outputs, and indeed this week’s proceedings more generally, will assume a crucial role in our preparations for the October European Council.

Your work this week towards bringing about a vibrant and borderless European digital society will have a lasting impact on the lives and welfare of Europe’s citizens, communities and businesses, creating much needed jobs, wealth and prosperity. Let us make sure we continue to work closely together to unlock the full potential of our Digital Agenda.

ENDS