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Keynote speech by Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources Pat Rabbitte TD
Digital Agenda Assembly
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Commissioner, ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to start by re-enforcing the Taoiseach's words of welcome at last night's reception. As Enda Kenny said, Ireland is fully committed to ensuring that Digital will continue to be at the heart of the European agenda.

Young people has been a key theme here and I know that yesterday there was a workshop with Ireland's Future Creators, and that you will hear from our 13 year old entrepreneur, Jordan Casey later. Digital art has also been a theme, and you will have seen students from our College of Art and Design Technology doing a 3D digital sculpture of David Puttnam during lunch yesterday.

What we are saying is that digital is alive and is digital is for everyone, from the artist, to the shopkeeper, the entrepreneur, the older person and the child.

We are delighted that the Commissioner agreed to the suggestion of the Irish Presidency that we take this year's Digital assembly out of the corridors of power in Brussels and to provide space for other voices to come through and share their experiences. After all, that is what digital is all about - decentralising power and listening to diverse voices from diverse places.

It seems a little strange to be opening a conference when in fact we are half way through the proceedings. However, I think that yesterday's seven workshops provided an excellent opportunity for those other voices to come through yesterday, though I don't envy the 7 rapporteurs the challenge of summarising a day's work in 5 minutes each. How does one convey the energy of the Future Creators in Workshop 1, the breadth of cyber-security dilemmas discussed in workshop 5 or the "Dragons Den" dynamic at play in workshop 6?

I'd like to make a couple of points about Ireland's experience as a nation addressing the digital agenda. I would also like to draw a couple of conclusions arising from our experience in the chair of the Telecoms Council over the last 6 months.

This time last year we completed a fruitful dialogue between policy makers and the Irish telecoms industry that led to the design of an ambitious but, I believe, realistic National Broadband Plan. The plan, which has been endorsed by my Government colleagues, focuses on ensuring robust, fast broadband in the most thinly populated areas of rural Ireland.

Many of you will be aware that Ireland's population is one of the most dispersed in Europe. We have had to face up to the fact that, without some form of public support there is no commercial case for the private sector to bring next generation broadband to at least 15% and perhaps as many as 30% of Irish homes. The Government is clear. This portion of our population must not be left behind with the 1 or 2 Mbps that are currently available to them. Therefore, we have commenced a major project to roll out availability of at least 30Mbps
to all rural Irish homes by 2016. This will be a complex project and, Commissioner, I know we share common cause in ensuring working with DG Connect, and most importantly DG Competition in clearing the way for this major investment.

We heard at yesterday's broadband demand workshop that there are many different models for deployment but there seemed to consensus on one issue - in rural areas, across the world, Government's have to intervene if high speed broadband is to be provided to citizens and businesses.

I might mention that Ireland is well positioned to achieve the Digital Agenda targets. We have delivered basic broadband to all by 2013. We have committed to 30 mbps to all by 2016 – well ahead of the DAA target of 2020. Personally I suspect that the most challenging of the EU's targets is to ensure that 50% of EU citizens are actually subscribing to a 100 mbps service by 2020 but time will tell and if we could bottle the enthusiasm displayed in yesterday's workshops I'm sure we would be no problem.

When we consider that tablet devices are only about three years old, and reflect on the pace of increase in smart phone penetration, it is not unthinkable that consumers and businesses will be demanding high quality services in the space of seven short years.

But we all know that digitizing Europe is not simply a matter of "build it and they will come". If we are committed to a truly digital society we must work out how to engage what my colleagues in the Ministry call the "non-liners". I'm not just thinking of the long term unemployed with low skills or the many people in their 60's or older who feel they'll never catch up. I'm also thinking of the small business owners who don't find time to reconsider the way they do business and the ones who discover too late that their customers have gone on line and abandoned them for a supplier - very often abroad.

My next step, therefore, is to bring a strategy on digital engagement to Government.
·   We will be focusing, firstly, on that very large part of the SME sector which is not trading on line.
·   Secondly, we will be redoubling our efforts to reach out to the digitally excluded.
·   Thirdly, we will be highlighting the potential of the education system. David Puttnam, who will speak to you shortly on broader themes already addressed this issue at workshop #1 yesterday. He and I share a conviction as to the potential for transformation in the education system.

Setting stretching connectivity targets and focusing on digital engagement are two important dimensions of both national and European digital agendas. Of course there are many others which were discussed in workshops yesterday and which are on the Commissioner's "to-do-list".

As a small open trading economy, Commissioner, you can count on Ireland's support in your campaign for a Communicating Single Market. Both individuals and businesses can undoubtedly benefit from this sort of integration. This summer's further cuts in roaming data charges are a good example of what can be achieved.

Council Presidency

As the Taoiseach and the Commissioner observed yesterday evening, Ireland was determined to hold a digital presidency. That meant bringing the Digital Agenda Assembly to Dublin but it also meant making progress on important files over the last 6 months:

We finalised the Directive on the Re-use of Public Sector Information. This is a Directive which will make public sector information available to citizens and entrepreneurs allowing new digital products and services to emerge.

Trust and security is a key pillar of the Digital Agenda and we concluded a new mandate for ENISA, during our Presidency while simultaneously progressing the proposed Directive on Network Information Security and a new Cyber Security Strategy for Europe.

We gave particular priority during our Presidency to the eIdentification and Trust Services file - essential measures for an effective digital Single Market.

Data Protection and copyright are also key issues for a digital single market, and we have made good progress on these complex dossiers in the Justice and Home Affairs and Competitiveness Councils.

Inclusion is a key theme of the Digital Agenda and we cannot hope to have a truly functioning digital single market, if all citizens are not enabled access services. The proposed Web Accessibility Directive is important in this regard and during Ireland's Presidency, we have commissioned some important research by Ireland's National Disability Authority on this theme. The research will assess what Member States might need to do to ensure that citizens are not excluded from access to online Government services.

Commissioner, I am well aware that there is only a year left to complete the elements of the Digital Agenda that you have prioritised. Let me assure you, that you will have our full support in completing the process while Ireland is still in the presidency and, equally once we have passed the baton to first, our Lithuanian and then our Greek colleagues.

Telecoms and the wider digital agenda.

In October the digital economy and competitiveness will be the central item on the agenda of the European Council meeting to be chaired by Herman Van Rompuy.   As we know the pace of growth of the digital economy far outpaces that of other sectors. At a time when so many areas of the economy in Europe are more or less stagnating, digital is a shining star.   I'm sure the debate today will help shape the preparations for the digital European Council.

Matt, in closing I'd just like to share, without comment, a brief clip of some other voices arising from some interviews we have been doing as part of our work preparing a national digital engagement strategy.

Thanks you for your attention.

ENDS