I wish to thank the Commission for inviting me here today to participate in this opening panel session. I also wish to commend the Commission for the initiative they have taken in ensuring that freedom of expression and media is seen as a key element in the accession negotiations for candidate countries, and in supporting efforts to promote this.

Let me first reiterate here that Ireland is a keen supporter of enlargement. Enlargement is a key part of the Irish Presidency programme. We recognise that the enlargement policy remains the EU’s most effective tool in supporting reform and transformation.
throughout Europe. Ultimately we believe the policy contributes to both our security and our prosperity.

Ireland has experienced these positive effects first hand. This year marks the 40th anniversary of our EU accession. Membership of the EU has been a driving force for social and political change in Ireland, one of the first three “accession” states of the European Union. During our last Presidency in 2004, we welcomed ten new Member States into the EU during the ‘Day of Welcomes’. In 2013 the Irish Presidency has continued to prioritise a credible enlargement policy based on the principle of conditionality.

The European Union may have changed dramatically in the 40 years since Irish accession. It is a political union and an economic union. It is a Union that is not without its problems. But let us not forget one fundamental point that has not changed; that the Union is first and foremost a Union of values.
The values upon which the Union is founded are set out clearly in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. They are: human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These are powerful values and it is worthwhile recalling them. They provide the bedrock of the Union itself and they provide inspiration for its citizens and the citizens of aspiring member states for the type of society in which we wish to live.

Freedom of expression is a basic building block of an open and free society. It is necessary for the empowerment of citizens, and we have a public duty – State, civil society and the international community – to work for its protection. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights states as follows: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."
While adopted as far back as 1948, the text of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights has stood the test of time in protecting freedom of opinion and expression and this Article was adopted wholesale into the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU.

However, while these are the values the Union is founded on, I regret we in the EU don’t have a magic formula for ensuring compliance and respect of them. Ensuring these freedoms is a challenge we have to face every day. And not all of us are performing as well as we might like; or living up to the ideals we profess.

In that regard, I have looked at the conclusions and recommendations by the Chair of the last Speak Up conference, and particularly agree with the comment that ensuring freedom of expression is a challenge facing EU and enlargement countries alike. But because it is a challenge we are continually addressing, we can offer to share our experience and
lessons learned. I hope today’s conference will provide a forum in that regard.

What is indisputable in every society is that media matters. As citizens, as consumers, as voters, we need a free, diverse media – not beholden to a single sector of society, to large commercial concerns, or to a single political party. Whether we chose to admit it or not, for both politicians and those we serve, media plays a central and critical role in conveying information, parsing outcomes and passing judgement – they create the written and recorded account of what happens. In a very practical sense, they create the reality within which we exist and act.

Because of this, the nature and character of media matters too. Its ability to speak truth to power and to challenge authority is one of those slender columns that sustain democracy. If that capacity is reduced in any way, then we are all the poorer for it. If media is fettered, either by the interests of owners, by fear of
authority, or by simple groupthink, then our democracy is worse off.

However, as we have seen demonstrated many times in recent years, where traditional media is unable, or is prevented, from reporting, new media and social networks will fill the void.

In the same way as newspapers, radio and television have helped citizens to inform themselves better and to erode monopolies of knowledge, the internet does likewise, but much better, due to its global reach and interactive nature. It expands the role of citizen from passive consumer to active creator. So it is increasingly difficult for governments, should they attempt it, to control the narrative through national media. Just as the expansion of the railway network in Russia at the turn of the 20th century facilitated the spread of revolutionary ideas, the internet is the catalyst and not the motivation for political change.

From the printing press, to the telegraph, to the telephone, to television, the singular purpose of
technological innovation in communications has been to widen access to ideas and knowledge, not to contain it. While we can trace a clear arc between the desire to communicate with one's neighbour, and the emergence of mass media, mass media share one obvious but crucial characteristic. What we read, hear or watch is decided by others, whether book publishers, newspaper editors, or TV and radio programmers and editorial boards. We are all passive consumers.

Yet, what we are now witnessing is the evolution of a new type of media, which blurs the distinction between interpersonal and mass communication, and between public and private communication.

Much has been made of the decision by CNN Turk to broadcast a documentary about penguins while Taksim Square was being cleared of protestors. However, as the events in Istanbul made abundantly clear, by choosing not to report broadcasters simply end up sidelining themselves, as citizens will go elsewhere.
As the domestic news coverage in the early days of the protests was relatively poor, social media played a pivotal role in both organizing the demonstrators and in broadcasting the events to the wider world.

I am therefore glad to see that you are devoting one of your sessions today to new media and new journalism, recognising it is there are similar challenges being faced in EU member states and those aspiring to membership.

Since the advent of the internet, the Irish Government has taken the view that, as a means of exercise of the right to freedom of expression, communication on the internet is clearly covered by international law pertaining to freedom of expression, just as much as a conversation on the telephone or a chat in a coffee-house. This should come as no surprise, as Ireland has, according to international indices, one of the freest media in the world. We believe that there should be as little restriction as possible to the flow of information on the internet, except under a few, very
exceptional and limited circumstances permitted under international law. In all such cases, international law prescribes that the restrictions must be clearly provided for in legislation, must pursue a legitimate purpose and must respect the principles of necessity and proportionality.

While Turkey is currently uppermost in many minds, given recent events, I would also point out that the demonstrations there show that Turkey is in transition and that a space for civil society has been opened up. This is due in large part to the significant reforms that have been undertaken inspired by the EU accession process. Even journalists known as supporters of the government have had the freedom to air their concerns about the police response to protests. In that respect, citizens from some of the Western Balkans countries might envy their Turkish counterparts and their ability to bring their concerns to such worldwide attention.

If I may return in closing to Irish experience again, as some of you may be aware, last Friday was the 16th of
June, also known as Bloomsday to fans and scholars of James Joyce, one of the most important authors of modernist literature of the 20th Century. His most famous work, Ulysses, was set in Dublin on 16 June 1904, chronicling a day in the life of Leopold Bloom. Following its publication in 1922, Ulysses was declared obscene and banned in Britain, the United States and elsewhere, though never – contrary to popular belief - in Ireland. During his life, Joyce championed freedom of expression and fought against all forms of censorship. If he were alive today, I have no doubt that Joyce would be a strong supporter of media freedom. I am also confident Joyce would have been a supporter of the European Union, and in particular of the freedoms it tries to protect, not least given his own propensity to wander through its many cities.

Freedom of expression and media continues to need protection and promotion, as much within the EU as in countries aspiring to join. The rise of new media is presenting challenges to governments and traditional media alike. But it is also ensuring that the issue of
freedom of expression and media remains in sharp focus. I hope the conference today will go some way to supporting those freedoms and I wish you well in your deliberations.

Thank you.