

## EU must shape a digital society, not just a digital market

Written by Constanze Krehl on 21 November 2014 in Opinion  
Opinion

As the digital society advances, challenges must be confronted to prevent the emergence of a digital divide, writes Constanze Krehl.



The EU has set out ambitious goals in the field of telecommunication and digital policies, including fast broadband connections for all citizens and ultra-fast connections for at least half of all citizens by the end of the decade. The EU clearly ascribes major importance to the provision of broadband for enabling social integration and economic competitiveness. Europe has faced a long period of economic recession, having brought some member states to the verge of ruin. The promotion of innovative technologies has been a major focus in recent years and further advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) will significantly benefit the social and economic potential of Europe.

The digital agenda is a cross-cutting issue. It touches upon several policy fields. However, the key challenge is to lay the foundation for building a digital society, not just a digital market. Policymakers, entrepreneurs and social partners need to act in concert to achieve this goal. Today the boundaries of

telecommunication, IT and media have almost vanished. The digital sphere impacts our daily lives more than ever before. This is neither wholly positive nor negative. However, there is a need for policymakers to shape and direct developments for the good of citizens. Often, technological developments outpace political answers and legislative proposals.

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It is not enough just to create technical and economic preconditions to develop a digital market. The focus of our joint endeavours is the development and governance of a ubiquitous digital society. Therefore, we need to strengthen the ICT sector and the digital market as much as we need to invest in digital education. I would like to stress the social aspects of the European digital agenda and the need to keep in mind aspects of consumer and data protection, in addition to education.

To achieve a ubiquitous digital society, certain challenges need to be addressed which go beyond the goals set out in the Europe 2020 strategy. First, we have to prevent a societal digital divide between those with unlimited access to a fast and inexpensive internet connection and those being held back due to infrastructural shortcomings. To allow for fair and equal access to media and information, we need to safeguard an open and neutral internet. Therefore, we need to overcome digital handicaps which hinder the further development of a digital market. Second, we need to further promote digital awareness. We must strengthen the digital and media literacy of citizens to enable responsible and confident interaction with current and future ICT facilities.

Additionally, we need to intensify European investment in the digital market. This includes investing in modern infrastructure as well as investments in creative technologies and research. Europe needs to become a leader in ICT developments, such as the 'internet of things'. It is essential that we make use of the allocated funding instruments and align them with our strategies. Finally, we must guarantee the protection of privacy and freedom of expression within and outside of the digital environment. This includes high level data protection, the right to information and the protection of consumers.

If we are willing to comply with these aspects of a digital society, the European economy will benefit from these developments. It is up to us to decide if we want to take these steps towards a ubiquitous digital society.

## **About the author**

Constanze Krehl is a substitute member of parliament's industry, research and energy committee.

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