

Digital single market strategy lacks social dimension

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Opinion

The commission's digital single market strategy is a good start, but more needs to be done on digital inclusion, writes Catherine Stihler.



The European commission has presented its long-awaited and much-hyped digital single market strategy.

Its 16 proposals, to be delivered over the next five years, are a step in the right direction in addressing the problems consumers and businesses face in accessing the digital single market, but it is by no means a silver bullet.

While lacking any concrete legislative proposals in its current form, we now hope to see regulatory action proposed by the commission in the near future, with set timescales and deadlines for implementation.

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Member states' engagement is key to the whole strategy. Having the former Estonian prime minister (commission vice-president for the digital single market Andrus Ansip) lead the agenda is helpful, but how will the commission ensure all 28 member states help deliver on the proposals?

Member states' leadership will determine success or failure. Otherwise the strategy could end up as nothing but a pipe dream.

Today's blueprint has the potential to be a success story with a variety of audiences, with crucial initiatives addressed at SMEs and businesses, such as more harmonised and simpler cross-border rules on eCommerce and lower delivery costs for parcel deliveries, as well as minimising burdens attached to selling cross-border arising from different VAT regimes.

Consumers are also set to benefit from simpler and clearer rules on eCommerce as well as equal treatment and will no longer be subject to price discrimination based on their geographical location.

The strategy recognises that boosting the digital economy through digitalisation of industry and the creation of single EU standardisation strategies will accelerate digital processes and improve interoperability, as well as making the telecoms rules fit for purpose.

I am pleased to see the commission has a strong stance on spectrum policy and wants to continue to set 800MHz consistently across Europe. For example, this would enable rural areas in my home country Scotland to have the best network coverage they have ever seen, yet the UK government announced last year they only plan to reach the band of 500MHz by 2020.

This is another example of what I said earlier - if member states fail to come on board, targets will remain just that - targets.

However, despite the positive message, the missing part is digital inclusion. Almost half of the EU population (47 per cent) are not properly digitally skilled, and yet in the not too distant future, 90 per cent of jobs will require digital knowhow.

Why does the strategy not mention anywhere that 20 per cent of the EU population has never used the internet? This figure comes from the commission's own research just last year.

Accessibility is key if we want to create a digital Europe, yet three most important reasons for households not having internet access are that it is not needed (49 per cent), a lack of skills (37 per cent) and because the equipment (30 per cent) and access (26 per cent) costs are too high. For families with children and low income households, costs are particularly important.

In the past, those without access to the internet at home could often rely on access in public libraries, but due to cuts in public services across the EU, this access is now more limited. It prohibits many from online learning and applying for jobs via the internet.

And where is the initiative on digital inclusion? The strategy talks about improving digital skills and expertise, rightfully so, as the EU has a growing deficit of ICT professional skills, forecast to reach 900,000 by 2020.

Yet up to 50 per cent of young people aged 18-25 in Spain are unemployed. The jobs are clearly out there, but how do we bridge the two and close the digital skills gap? I would have liked to see more of a social dimension included in the paper, yet it has failed to deliver on that front.

The time has come for Europe to stop playing second fiddle to Silicon Valley. By bringing the whole of the EU into the digital age we can remove the digital divide and really drive economic recovery. With over 500 million people, we can do better than second best.

About the author

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[European Commission](#) [5]

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- [3] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/news/digital-single-market-strategy-lacks-ambition>
- [4] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/tags/digital-agenda>
- [5] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/tags/european-commission>
- [6] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/categories/science-technology-and-research>