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**Speech to Meeting of Chairpersons of Communications,
Education and Transport Committees**

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Final Draft

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Good afternoon, it's a genuine pleasure to have been invited to speak to you today in my role as Digital Champion for Ireland.

In many respects life in this country, as in Europe and indeed most other parts of the world, has been quite literally transformed in the past twenty years or so.

Digital technology – mobile telephony and the internet in particular – has fundamentally reshaped the way in which people of every age connect with, make sense of, and engage with society.

As this audience knows better than most, rightly or wrongly, people expect an entirely new form of relationship with the world around them; one that doesn't simply rely on accessing information, but on creating new knowledge, new products and even new resources.

The pace, scale and ramifications of this change have been quite remarkable.

And this creates enormous opportunities as well as challenges for all of us in Europe – in an era when each Member State needs to use every scrap of imagination and talent to help solve the massive structural problem of unemployment which, as the figures released a couple of weeks ago remind us, continues to grow.

But we also need to move fast.

Europe is in danger of falling into a trap that the famed scientist and novelist HG Wells once described in the following way:

“In England we have come to rely upon a comfortable time lag of fifty or a hundred years between the perception that something ought to be done, and a serious attempt to do it”.

Simply by taking a look at the broadband speeds available in some of the more affluent areas of Asia such as Singapore or South Korea, you begin to get sense of the direction in which things are heading, and the nature of the opportunity that's beginning to open up.

What's certain is that those countries certainly do!

How about this for an example of 'seriousness of intent'!

About a dozen years ago the South Korean Government, including its educational system, became concerned that, whilst its 'industrial base' was growing well, the 'creativity element', within which so much intellectual property and 'value added' resides, was not developing at anything like the same rate.

They decided to invest around one billion dollars over a number of years in developing and enhancing what was termed their, 'creative capacity'.

The programme has been an unqualified success - to the point at which South Korea is now the 'powerhouse' of the Asian entertainment products industry - everything from music, to movies, interactive games and television soap operas.

And far from becoming complacent, this year their Ministry for Culture, Tourism and Sport has been given a budget of \$3.5 billion US dollars, of which \$295 million is specifically earmarked for the promotion on the international stage of what they call 'Hallyu', or the 'Korean Wave' of entertainment products - almost \$300 million simply^{on} it's 'promotion'!

That's a very grown-up and serious competitor for Europe to even think about taking on.

And bear in mind this is happening in a nation with a population just one-tenth the size of the EU - and which, fifty years ago, was one of the poorest on earth!

But other equally serious challenges also remain.

For example, here in Ireland one in five Irish citizens have never ever used the internet, and there are any number of reasons why that simply has to change!

Then of course there's the potential impact of digital technologies on education - a subject I've obsessed over for the past twenty years!

The EU has forecast that, as we move closer to a fully digital economy, by 2015 only 1 job in 10 will not require a full compliment of e-Skills.

The European Commission also estimates that there will be up to 1m job vacancies in the ICT sector in Europe by 2015 - in fact the authoritative Annual Trends Report, published a few weeks ago estimates that there will be 2.4 computer science job openings for every qualified graduate that exists to fill it..

All of which suggests an urgent need to accelerate our ICT learning capacity, and address the whole challenge of learning to learn through the use of advanced technology.

As Bill Gates recently said of a conversation with Steve Jobs:

“When he was sick I was able to spend time with him.

We talked about what we’d learned – about families, everything.

He was not being melancholy, he was very forward-looking, saying we haven’t really improved education with technology.”

As usual Steve Jobs was right.

As I see it, the problems surrounding the adoption of advanced technologies as part and parcel of day-to-day teaching practice stem from two very different approaches to the technology itself.

The first seems designed to support or reinforce existing, or in even outdated practices - some of which are only changing at a glacial pace!

It's a little like putting that man with the red flag back in front of each automobile, and simply encouraging him to jog a little faster!

Merely 'digitising' old practices is, in effect, simply seeking to get the same or similar results - but faster.

Which takes us straight to the heart of the problem.

If all you do with technology is use it to support existing methodologies and practice, then why, and on what possible basis would you expect new or significantly better results?

I've long been suggesting to just about anyone who'll listen that what's required to drive educational improvement is a second; far more radical approach – we need to consider what a major, positive and creative 'disruption' in learning and teaching might look like.

That's to say, what advances could an entire digital pedagogy achieve - as opposed to simply 'digitising' and incrementally improving the existing curriculum?

Obviously much of what I'm proposing inevitably challenges WHAT we teach; as well as HOW it's taught – and even, in some cases, WHY it's taught!

We've discovered that learning is no longer something that needs to happen within particular hours, in a particular place, or even with a particular group of people.

The immense power of the worldwide web means that a fantastic 'knowledge resource' is always just a click away - in schools, colleges, homes and increasingly, on the move - to the extent that anyone with an internet connection has the power to access this extraordinary 'treasure trove' of knowledge within, literally, seconds.

Any time. Any place.

These digital technologies have allowed us to store, share and search knowledge in ways that our predecessors could barely have dreamed of!

In every sense the world's 'digital library is always open' -

I heard Noam Chomsky in London a couple of months ago refer to today's 'digital library' as the greatest assemblage of knowledge in human history - although in other respects he remains something of a 'digital sceptic'!

In one sense he's probably right to remain a little sceptical, in that the existence of this extraordinary cornucopia of knowledge only makes the need for teachers and curators of information - in essence, 'trusted learning guides' – more crucial than ever.

Young people in particular may be very smart about using the technology – a good deal smarter than many of us I suspect.

But in today's society, access to communication is no longer confined, as it was in the past, to a single small elite.

Today anyone can join a social network or set up a blog and, potentially, reach out to other interested souls – distance no longer being any kind of an obstacle.

Our need is to create learning environments in which informed responses to the immense challenges of the 21st century are encouraged and nurtured.

Yet despite those troubling employment facts I've just cited, and endless speeches about the degree to which our future global economy is dependent on the development of creativity and imagination, can we in Europe honestly claim to be doing anything like enough to locate and release those talents?

Tied as we are to our existing structures and precepts, I'm not sure we're even entirely sure how to go about releasing them!

Students starting school this year will enter the world of work at some point between 2025 and 2030; and retire around 2075 - assuming they can afford to!

Given that we can't, with any degree of certainty, predict what the world's going to look like in five, let alone ten years' from now, we've certainly no idea what it's going to look like in 2075!

So the very best we can do is prepare today's students for a world of increasing unpredictability, equipping them - in addition to a full compliment of digital and communication skills - with the necessary degrees of co-operation, agility, compassion and intelligence to anticipate and deal with the many, and mostly unknown challenges, of the next half-century.

To achieve that simply means people like us, here in Dublin Castle today, having to work that much harder to make it happen.

Thank you very much for listening to me.

(1,502 words. About 10 minutes)