Information society, eEurope: Commission initiative for European Council in Lisbon, 23-24 March 2000

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The European Commission has adopted the 2002 "eEurope Benchmarking Report", a communication providing a detailed snapshot of the development of the European Information Society since the Lisbon Summit in March 2000. The eEurope Benchmarking exercise analyses data from across Europe on key indicators, ranging from the price of an internet connection to the number of connected schools. The findings are that the eEurope Action Plan has helped increase the number of connected households, schools and business, but that the rate of growth is slowing. Broadband uptake, moreover, is still sluggish, generally expensive and limited to two platforms. The growth of e-commerce is also slowing, while the number of security problems grows. The 2000 Lisbon Summit, which called for the EU to become the most dynamic, knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010, led to the eEurope Action Plan 2002. Benchmarking is a key component of the Action Plan, as it highlights best practices from across the continent and points the way forward for European policy. The eEurope Benchmarking Report 2002 is therefore a key input into the Barcelona European Council in March, where progress towards the Lisbon target will be assessed and new priorities will be identified. The take-up of the internet in European households has increased rapidly (38% in December 2001). Efforts to increase internet use in countries well below the EU average are therefore needed, as is the development of alternative access platforms. Growth in both consumer and corporate e-commerce has been slower than expected. Only 4% of users classify themselves as frequent online purchasers, although the report does show an unexpected surge of peer-to-peer e-commerce. Similarly, only around 20% of European companies buy and sell online, with larger companies dominating, which means that small European companies are not yet taking advantage of e-commerce within the Single Market. Significant progress has recently been made in boosting Europe's research networks with the GEANT Network. Created by the Commission and 27 national research and education networks, GEANT reached a maximum speed of 10 Gigabit/s last December, making it the fastest research network in the world, offering the widest geographic coverage - 32 countries, including all Candidate countries. Overall, the report states that while the eEurope Action Plan 2002 was a successful short-term tool to get Europe online quickly, just being connected is not enough to achieve the Lisbon target. A new focus on effective usage of the Internet is required to bring the benefits of the Information Society to European society. Among other recommendations, the report also calls for: - Concerted action to close the 'internet penetration gap' and the 'digital divides' which threaten - Europe's social cohesion in the new century; - An urgent review of the obstacles to e-commerce; - The integration of the Internet into schooling, not just schools; - The creation of the cyber security task force to tackle security issues and internet crime; - More eGovernment; - Full integration of Candidate Countries into the eEurope process.