EU pushes button for next Internet age

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EU commissioner for Digital Agenda Neelie Kroes in 2010. Europe geared up on Tuesday for a quantum leap in Internet traffic and a new generation of infrastructure to carry data, announcing the launch of a 600-million-euro research and investment programme.

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The EU's record in major high-tech spheres has been questionable, beginning with a much-delayed and massively over-budget 5.4-billion-euro Galileo satellite navigation system, aimed at rivalling the US-built Global Positioning System (GPS) and Chinese and Russian projects.

The European Union is also part funding the Large Hadron Collider (LHC), a 3.9-billion-euro ($5.2-billion) nuclear physics experiment inside a 27-kilometre (16.8-mile) Swiss mountain tunnel aimed at

unlocking some of the universe's deepest secrets, which has suffered a series of failures in early years.

However, Tuesday's latest project launch, seeking a robust new architecture for a future Internet capable of handling an "exponential" increase in data, sends a more readily grasped signal to millions of citizens and organisations whose dreams of real-time interactivity on the move are slowly turning to reality.

The European Commission is investing an initial amount of 90 million euros in the first phase of a five-year public-private partnership, matched by funding from private organisations across the EU.

"The Internet economy will be growing to 5.8 percent of GDP, or almost 800 billion euros, by 2014. But we are only at the beginning of the Internet era," said Neelie Kroes, the commissioner responsible for the EU's digital agenda.

Internet data traffic is growing by 60 percent a year, the commission says, and the project is designed to boost innovation and develop Internet solutions "capable of managing the exponential increase in (mobile) online data."

By 2016, the commission has promised a 300-million-euro investment, matched by the private sector, with Kroes equally concerned by a desire to "safeguard European values like privacy, openness and diversity."

Initial projects being funded include Internet tools for things like electricity management at community level -- new governments invariably find vast differences in billing across departments -- ahead of a large-scale trial.

"Social networking sites connect over a billion people worldwide and

even help people to overthrow autocratic and corrupt regimes," Kroes said in her launch speech as 158 partner organisations came together in Brussels from 23 states.

"We are heading for a world that is much smarter. Where information generated by people and our environments can be used productively in real time."

She said the collection of environmental data for weather forecasting would in future also feed into "personal health information systems, or traffic management or agriculture."

"This gap in capacity and capabilities is waiting to be filled," she said, urging backers to "grab this opportunity" to accelerate economic growth and steal a march on global rivals.

A veteran of EU action to drive down mobile phone bills for consumers, Kroes' digital agenda has previously seen her bid to extend mobile Internet access to Europe's farthest flung outposts by opening up commercial rights to the old analog broadcasting spectrum.

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