

Following is the speech by the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mrs. Rita Lau, at iProA 10th Anniversary Dinner:

Dr. Winnie Tang, Dr. Eric Cheng, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good evening! It is my great pleasure to join you tonight to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the Internet Professional Association (iProA).

The past decades have seen amazing developments in the Internet: from a tool primarily intended for use in and among universities, to now a universal source of information. The Internet is changing the way we learn, work, do business, communicate and socialise. Just a decade ago, only four people out of a hundred were Internet users. Today, 24% of the world population surfs the web, with the total number of users already well past the 1.5 billion mark. Here in Hong Kong, the penetration rate of broadband in households has increased dramatically from below 2% to around 78% over the same period.

All of us in this room this evening will have claim to be computer literate and no doubt feel very comfortable in cyberspace. Unfortunately, there are still significant numbers of people in our community that are excluded from all that the web has to offer. Recently, I have come across people who are unable to rejoin the work force because of a lack of Internet skills. Worse than this, I know of parents who feel they have lost their kids to the web and are genuinely afraid of what they are doing on line. And there are unfortunately too many of our older citizens who do not feel comfortable to avail themselves to be connected to the internet.

No one wants to be left out. No one should be.

Building an inclusive, knowledge-based society is one of the key focuses of the Government's Digital 21 Strategy. We are fully committed to enabling citizens and businesses to realise their full potential through ICT. To narrow the digital divide, we have implemented a number of initiatives, such as the Recycled Computer Programme, District Cyber Centre Programme, and the Government WiFi Programme, just to name a few. But no government can ever bridge the digital divide without the help of the community.

It is no overstatement to say that iProA is an organisation with a vision. Ten years ago, when it was established, iProA recognised the power of the Internet and the need to narrow the digital divide. It has pioneered many digital inclusion initiatives,

developed Internet educational programmes, and recruited volunteers to train more than 10,000 new users. I am delighted to say that it is also taking an active role in the District Cyber Centre Programme, as well as the sector-specific training programmes for SMEs.

I am not at all surprised to see the faces of so many of my friends in the civil service here tonight. Their presence reflects the many different areas in which iProA has made a difference. In 2003 when Hong Kong was hard hit by SARS, iProA made a tremendous contribution in the areas of disease tracking and control. It has since played a key role in the eHealth Consortium, which seeks to promote collaboration between health care and IT professionals for a healthier tomorrow for everyone in Hong Kong.

ICT has great potential of making this world a better place to live in. To realise this potential, however, it takes more than just IT knowledge, as iProA has demonstrated through its devotion and care.

In closing, I would like to borrow an episode from "The wonderful wizard of Oz" by Lyman Frank Baum.

"All the same," said the Scarecrow, "I shall ask for brains instead of a heart; for a fool would not know what to do with a heart if he had one."

"I shall take the heart," returned the Tin woodman, "for brains do not make one happy and happiness is the best thing in the world."

Dorothy did not say anything, for she was puzzled to know which of her two friends was right...

While Dorothy did eventually find out that we all need a heart and a brain, she also learnt that to be truly rounded people we also need the courage to do what is right. I would like to thank all those involved with iProA for giving the Hong Kong community the benefit of both their brains and hearts over the past 10 years and having the courage to stand out for what you believe in: an Internet that serves everyone in our community.

Here's wishing you many more fruitful years ahead.

Thank you.