

**Paradiso workshop on
'Understanding the Interactions between Internet and Societal Developments'
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Let me begin by thanking the organisers for having invited me to share my views about the theme of this workshop and to give some information about the work of the Council of Europe, the 47-member pan-European Organisation in Strasbourg, representing 800 million Europeans.

At an individual level, we are frequent witnesses to the changes that the internet brings to the ways we communicate, particularly when we are with young people. I recently saw a cartoon that showed a 10-year old boy and his parents sitting around the dinner table and the father saying: 'Yes, we do know that you have a blog, but you might as well tell us now what you discussed at school today.'

But, more seriously, I want to address the question of 'understanding the interactions between internet and societal developments' at a higher level and begin by identifying some of the great challenges of our time and how productive and responsible use of the internet can help to confront these challenges.

From an economic point of view, in addition to the economic and financial crisis we are currently facing, there is a more fundamental challenge; this is the economic model based on fossil fuel/carbon consumption. Rather sooner than later, this model needs to be replaced by a post-carbon economy based on renewable energy sources.

From a political point of view, we are witnessing a crisis of representative democracy, accompanied by increasing calls by citizens for more participatory opportunities.

How can the internet help to confront these crises?

I was intrigued by a scenario recently suggested by Jeremy Rifkin¹ (and no doubt there are several alternative scenarios described by other scholars, as there is a lot of uncertainty as to what the future of the internet may look like), and allow me to expand on this for a short moment.

Rifkin argues that the global communication enabled by the internet has taken us into a third industrial revolution. Each industrial revolution, he says, was accompanied by a communication revolution which brought together people from diverse backgrounds into

¹ Jeremy Rifkin : The Empathic Civilization. An address before the British Royal Society for the Arts, 15 March 2010.

increasingly expansive and varied social networks. And each of these revolutions extends what he calls empathic sensibility.

The first industrial revolution in the 19th century was managed by print communication and ushered in ideological consciousness; People came to empathise with the nation state. The second industrial revolution in the 20th century was fronted and defined by electronic communication; it spawned psychological consciousness which, in turn, led individuals to identify with, or to empathise with, like-minded others.

Today, we are in the early stages of a third industrial revolution which features a new historic convergence of energy and communication: The ‘distributed internet revolution’ is coming together with distributed renewable energy generation which may make possible a globally connected and locally managed sustainable post-carbon economy. The new distributed communication revolution will also allow people to connect globally and for the first time in history allow them to empathise on a global scale.

The hope emerging from this (perhaps excessively optimistic) scenario is that, if we use our global communication media in the right way, we should be able to extend our empathic sensibility to the biosphere itself and to all of life on earth.

To do that, however, the internet needs to provide an enabling environment. I would like to explore this need from the angles of democracy and Human Rights, two of the key values underpinning the work of the Council of Europe.

Democracy

ICT offer citizens unprecedented means to participate in the political discourse. Today, citizens can individually and collectively interact with their elected representatives in much more direct ways than in the past and they can track their political behaviour and activities.

There is a growing multitude of participatory democratic innovations such as online petition platforms, participatory budgeting, citizens’ juries and Voting Advice Applications (VAAs).

As a result, the control of representative institutions over society is gradually crumbling. However, if pushed to the extreme, the process of opening up too far to participatory democracy can quite simply harm democracy. There is a risk that the long term perspective is replaced by short term considerations and popular demands may arise which openly violate the basic principles and values of modern democratic societies (consider the popular vote in Switzerland prohibiting the building of minarets in the country).

The Council of Europe Forum for the Future of Democracy, a series of conferences held annually since 2005, provides an important pan-European and multi-stakeholder platform

to discuss these and other risks to democracy and offers a space to formulate suggestions on how to tackle them.

Human rights in the information society

As already pointed out, Human Rights legislation helps to set the limits of what is negotiable in a democratic society and to establish a balance between the rights and the responsibilities of the individual.

Human rights are as valid in the online world as they are in the offline world. Whilst the internet may provide an opportunity to unlock rights, it must nevertheless be a space which mirrors key Human Rights values.

States, as much as people, benefit from the development of ICTs, but they will also have to ensure a corresponding level of protection of, and respect for, Human Rights. This would include that states increase their engagement with the private sector on these issues.

When it comes to Human Rights in the information society, we should consider, in particular, two key Articles in the European Convention on Human Rights: Article 10 on freedom of expression and Article 8 on the right to privacy.

Compliance with Article 10 is of great importance when internet actors attempt to filter or block websites or engage in other ways of cutting people's access to the internet. Access will become increasingly a legal and universal service obligation and will be more inextricably bound with Article 10.

With regard to Article 8, we are observing that people cede their privacy in return for access to social networks. How far may, and should, this be taken? Who protects, who respects, who owns private data? What will be the implications for privacy of cloud computing, of the internet of things, of the countless sensors that will be everywhere and will be constantly online? Will there be network neutrality, or will vested business interests prevail with profiling, targeted advertising or new forms of censorship?

The Council of Europe is addressing many of these issues: Its Committee of Ministers has adopted recommendations on the public service value of the internet and declarations on such issues as network neutrality or the management of Internet protocol addresses. The European Dialogue on Internet Governance (EURODIG) is facilitated by the Council of Europe and feeds into the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). Furthermore, the European Court of Human Rights is receiving an increasing number of cases relating to Human Rights in the information society.

Overall, the Council of Europe calls for a new approach to regulation which is neither based on traditional mass media regulation, nor based on complete deregulation.

To conclude, let us consider the young blogger I mentioned at the outset. We need to teach the young generation how to use the internet productively and responsibly. People need to learn to distinguish truth from illusion, they need to have a technical proficiency, but more importantly, they need to be fully digitally and media literate.

Such an approach to education will hopefully allow us to shape and use the internet in ways that contribute to the sustainable future of our societies and help us move towards what Rifkin calls an empathic civilisation.