

Our World in 2015

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Over the last 25 years, technology has transformed our lives in ways nobody could have imagined. No one thought it possible that we would today have instant access to all the knowledge, trivia and entertainment available in the world. But where it was once a fantastic breakthrough, the internet is now like electricity, both vital and freely available, on smartphones, tablets and computers.

The problem is, technology has over delivered and we have embraced it. Big data, the internet of things, cloud computing, these are today's buzz words, they have much to offer, and much to take. The collection and analysis of big data has massive scope for developing services to enhance our lives. But these benefits should not be at the expense of our fundamental rights, namely our privacy and personal information, and our rights to engage freely in the digital world and be in control of our personal data.

Big data carries big challenges for these rights. The data is often shared across borders for purposes that are not always clear nor for our benefit. Big data may have arrived, but not necessarily big insights, because companies – and national security agencies - are simply not equipped to analyse so much data effectively. A lack of effectiveness for the rights of individuals to exercise their data protection rights in the online environment often leaves users in a weak position.

Looking forward, if better quality personal data is needed for effective analysis (to deliver more value, monetary or otherwise), it is possible that big data will be even bigger. In a nutshell, big data needs equally big data protection solutions. We don't need to reinvent data protection principles, but we do need to "go digital". We need innovative thinking.

These developments present huge challenges for individuals, for businesses, and for us, the regulators.

But they are also an opportunity. This is a crucial moment for European data protection. We have a window of opportunity to adopt the future-oriented standards that we need for our changing, technology-driven society, standards that will be influential for the rest of the world, and that will apply whenever individuals in the EU are targeted by controllers, regardless of where they are established.

The European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS) is a relatively new but yet influential independent supervisory authority established at EU level. My aim as new Supervisor for the next five years is to identify innovative solutions quickly, particularly in our on-going work assisting the EU legislator to modernise and reform the current legal framework for data protection in the EU. We need to make the EU rules robust enough to cope with the growing challenges of new technologies and trans-border data flows.

There is a pressing need to see the Data Protection Reform adopted by 2015. It should not slow down innovation, but equally it should ensure that our fundamental rights are safeguarded and made effective in practice. We need new rules to rebuild the trust in the digital society that has been eroded by, for instance, massive surveillance.

Data protection is a relevant factor in most, if not all, EU policy areas. The EDPS has worked hard to demonstrate that data protection is the key to legitimise policies and increase trust and confidence in them. We will help the EU institutions and bodies to be accountable as legislators to build privacy into the very fabric of their legislative proposals.

We need clever, innovative solutions for the complex data protection challenges we face. I believe that it is vital to make data protection easier, clearer and less bureaucratic, so that it will underpin the digital world now and into the future.

Data protection is at the top of the EU agenda and the international agenda too and will certainly remain there for many years. Therefore, it is important to develop a single European voice on strategic data protection issues such as international data flows, big data and surveillance. So I will work hard to support cooperation with fellow independent data protection authorities to enforce the rules and implement the principles recently established by European Courts on the large scale processing of personal data.

It is time to re-evaluate international instruments in a more careful way, particularly transatlantic agreements. We need to make them fairer and more balanced in practice. To do this, we will work closely with fellow experts to develop a framework of practical solutions between strategic partners at international level.

While I will vigorously defend the EDPS' independence, this is not the same as being isolated or autocratic.

I believe that Europe and in particular, the EU institutions and bodies should lead the way in demonstrating effective data protection in practice. I envisage the EDPS being a more active partner, providing the EU institutions with practical and dynamic solutions in order to do this. We will encourage the EU institutions to develop a more accountable and modern data protection culture within the EU institutions, so that this enhanced compliance will set an example to others.

The EDPS is a relatively small EU institution compared to today's challenges for data protection. However, I have a talented and dynamic team at my side, and with our pragmatic and flexible strategy, we are fully equipped to tackle them. I hope to see the EDPS develop as a centre of interest in data protection, a forum for debate, and a place where all are welcome to work together on protecting our fundamental rights.