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*CPDP 2019 - Closing Remarks*

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Congratulations to Paul, Rosamunde, Dara and the whole team on another fantastic conference.

It is safe to say that the market for privacy and technology events in Brussels is saturated.

But CPDP continues to defy the laws of physics, reaching this year the maximum capacity of 1,250 registrations.

This is a great achievement – you almost compete with the number of registrations for the 2018 International Conference of Data Protection and Privacy Commissioners!

You are entitled to feel very proud.

For those wanting to escape the polar vortex over much of middle-America and the Eurasian landmass, there can be no better refuge than CPDP.

The first day of the conference coincided with an unusual milestone – spotted by clever man on Twitter.

The 13th of January 2019 was precisely 12,719 days after the ‘cold, bright day in April’ at the beginning of George Orwell’s 1984.

And that is the precisely the same amount of time between the publication of the novel in 1949 and the date it was set.

So the real 1984 is now more distant from us in the past than the dystopian 1984 was for Orwell in the future.

The appalling vision of 1984 may have mobilised many people in this room to fight to safeguard civil liberties in the face of technological change.

But the digital reality in 2019 is very different from the science fiction of the first half of the twentieth century.

We have just had the privilege of listening to Professor Zuboff both open and close this event.

Shoshana is now finally getting universal recognition as a profound, eloquent and erudite prophet of our time - a reputation she has long deserved.

Her overall diagnosis of 2019 is not Orwell's techno-totalitarianism - although there are some parts of the world which indeed do labour under a similarly oppressive regime.

Instead, Shoshana points to the constant mining of people - their thoughts and relationships in order to predict and shape their future behaviour.

This mined data is analysed and combined to become knowledge.

Knowledge becomes the power to decide what is true and not true.

And this power is now concentrated in a few hands like never before.

As a result, we don't have machines learning to be more intelligent than people as imagined by sci-fi novels and films.

But we do have people who are increasingly expected to think and operate like machines.

This digital future was not inevitable. And continuing on that trajectory is not inevitable either - even if many policymakers and investors assume that it is.

This is the delusion that lies behind, for example, the contention that updated EU rules on the confidentiality of communications - ePrivacy – must be opposed because they stand in the way of Artificial Intelligence.

In fact, this digital future has taken less than two decades to establish itself.

And it can just as easily unravel, and be replaced by a model which is more sustainable, more just, more democratic.

CPDP this year, in choosing the theme of democracy, reflects our realisation that our datafied, digitised economy and society does not just affect individuals.

The dominant business model - the mythology around connecting everyone and everything - the fetishization of big data and AI - this new orthodoxy of how to manage society, is now losing its shine.

People are waking up to the risk posed by rampant and unaccountable data practices to social cohesion and basic values like democracy.

We are realising that privacy is important not just to each of us as individuals. Privacy is a social good.

Respect for private space is necessary for freedom of expression.

Which means that privacy is essential for democracy.

And that is why in 10 days we will host, on the 11th of February, a conference on the multiple elections taking place this year in Europe, and on what DPAs and others need to do to expose and tackle manipulation in the digital space.

Because, dear friends, 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, our political discourse has moved into Walled Gardens.

These Walled Gardens are not really the “public sphere”, but rather unaccountable private spaces, where we are monitored and served information according to the logic of an opaque algorithm.

Democracy, after all, is more than just voting.

It is the freedom to participate in discussions

It is the freedom to receive information from a plurality of sources.

The right to be informed and to inform.

Everyone is are entitled to express her- or his self without their every move, thought and transaction being captured and marshalled to perfect a hidden profile.

If you still go and buy a newspaper in a shop, only the newsagent can observe and infer your political tendencies.

Now, thanks to programmatic advertising, this sensitive information is pumped out to hundreds of obscure agents in the “LUMAScape”.

They know what you read and don’t read.

Data protection authorities have been thinking about this for a long time. Back in 2005 the international conference adopted a resolution on political propaganda and personal data processing.

Now DPAs are raising their game.

As various panels this week have made clear: data protection is vital to securing trust in elections.

And data security is essential for elections to deliver a winner - but also to convince the loser of the fairness of the outcome.

In the words of Bruce Schneier, we cannot place democracy at the mercy of the vulnerabilities of computers – which, in the case of elections, are by nature hackable, unreliable, or not private – or all three.

The risks of failure in democratic processes are too high. Which is why, for instance, the Dutch government in 2017 decided to return to counting all ballots by hand.

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Let us however try to move beyond the language of risks and dystopian nightmares.

It’s been a terrific week and we should end with a call for positive action.

On this day, 1 February 1865, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution.

This amendment declared unconstitutional all slavery and involuntary servitude.

Subsequent case law interpreted the Amendment as prohibiting “control by which the personal service of one man is disposed of or coerced for another's benefit” (*Bailey vs Alabama*)

The principle is echoed in Article 5 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

And in recent years the EU has taken steps to prohibit “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons...by means of ...forms of coercion... of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability... for the purpose of exploitation.”

Those words are taken from the 2011 anti-human trafficking directive.

We now face the challenge of abolishing digital servitude – where people are mined for their data, and served back information selected by the algorithm, in order to induce to behave in a way that benefits a few powerful players.

The great Frederick Douglass was a man who in escaped from his slave-masters and became one of the most brilliant visionaries in US history.

In 1862 he delivered a lecture, called the ‘Age of Pictures’, about the impact of photography on society.

Douglass said, “in every human there are vast depths, resting in unbroken silence, never yet fathomed. We feel that there is something more, that the curtain has not yet been lifted... behind the seen lies the immeasurable unseen.”

Let us not doubt the capacity for people to lift that curtain - to see what really lies behind vague slogans like “Innovation”, “Artificial Intelligence”, “Smart this” and “Smart that”, to look into the black boxes of algorithms, to understand the extent of positive possibilities which technology can offer in a democracy.

Then we can start a more informed dialogue about how to shape technology and its application in ways which benefit the whole of society.

Thank you for your participation this week.

I wish you all a safe - and warm – journey home.