

- Check against delivery -

Ladies and gentlemen,

On Monday, during the closed session, we spoke about the Internet of Things; the development of a global infrastructure in which devices can be linked to each other and to people to exchange (personal) data.

Today I will speak about something that is closely related to the Internet of Things and is one of the most discussed topics at the moment : Big Data.

Innumerable conferences, articles and books all over the world are enthusiastically promoting Big Data, emphasizing its possibilities and chances, which seem endless.

Big Data indeed offers many great advantages, such as predicting epidemic, monitoring wildlife and increasing energy efficiency.

But I keep on asking myself, are we really ready for Big data?

Are we ready to face the challenges and privacy risks attached to it?

Big Data is all about collecting as much information as possible ; storing it in ever larger databases ; combining data that is collected for different purposes ; and applying algorithms to find correlations and unexpected new information.

This can be valuable in detecting organised crime for example, or in- as mentioned before - predicting and avoiding epidemics. But Big Data is not limited to large scale phenomena and problems.

Big Data is also utilized on an individual level.

And this is most troublesome. Because when Big Data concerns personal information, many risks arise.

I agree that the principles enshrined in our privacy and data protection laws need to be observed also in the face of Big Data, as is recognized in the recently adopted opinion of the Berlin group, by the Article 29 Working Party and in a Resolution adopted yesterday.

But my fear is that these principles, while widely recognized and supported since the 1980's are not enough. Will not form a dike that is high enough to keep us sheltered from the manmade tsunami of Big Data.

The aim of the protection of personal data is surprise minimisation, by requiring compliance with basic principles such as purpose limitation, data minimisation and transparency.

The thing about Big Data however is, that it aims for surprise maximisation, by using already stored data in different contexts to discover completely new knowledge and correlations, by applying ingenious mathematical formulas.

To exploit this to the maximum possible, those who are involved in the development and use of Big Data will be tempted to do so by ignoring the basic principles of purpose limitation, data minimisation and transparency.

And an additional frightening fact is that the statistical information, even if the data used is properly anonymised, can lead to such precise results that it

essentially constitutes re-identification! Which is in a way exactly what commercial and public use of Big Data is all about.

For example, there is this slightly balding man, almost 65 years old, who lives in the centre of Amsterdam, travels every day to The Hague by subway and train, doesn't own a car, but makes use of a car-sharing service (called green wheels) and uses cars of this service that are parked within a range of 0.5 kilometres from a specific location in the city centre and who doesn't watch tv too often, but visits a particular news site, that focusses on internet and privacy, several times a day...

Is there anyone still wondering who this person might be?

Everybody nowadays gets a profile - with false positive and false negative consequences of varying degrees - which leads to being treated differently than others.

One of the most important characteristics of our democratic societies is however the possibility for individuals to develop freely. That people can flourish and follow their own path.

Big Data puts this at risk.

Full individual development will become an illusion when too many choices are already made for you on the basis of a profile, without you knowing what that profile looks like, what data are used to build it, let alone what consequences you will be confronted with because of that profile.

And this, to me, is a frightening manifestation of digital predestination.

It will lead to a society in which people are being profiled and treated on the basis of this profile. Where public bodies seem to be treating you with

distrust, for example because you fall in a particular category of notorious tax-evaders.

Where a filter is applied on what information people are shown or offers they are made, by using their particular profile. With people often not knowing that there is a filter in place, let alone what this filter means and how it was created.

We all know the example of the company Target that on the basis of certain data knew a girl was pregnant and sent coupons to her address for discount on baby items, without even her father knowing his daughter was pregnant.

This caused a lot of outrage, but if we do not act, things will get worse.

For example, the Catalano family's home was invaded by a SWAT team, merely because the husband had been looking for a new backpack online and the wife had been searching for a pressure cooker to be able to learn how to cook lentils, two very ordinary items, but used not long before in the bombings at the Boston marathon.

The Catalano family was treated, profiled, as potential bombers!

Some of you will say that this was an incident and will not happen again, but I think they might be underestimating what the phenomenon of Big Data may lead to.

Big Data has the potential of leading us on to a - predetermined and maybe sometimes dangerous - path. A path that may in the end undermine the values that underpin our democratic societies, by depriving people of their free choice, of their right to personal development and equal treatment.

Which could be misused by those with power in the world to the detriment of the less fortunate ones.

When it comes to Big Data it is furthermore often mistakenly assumed, in the public debate, that individuals "voluntarily" provide their information. It is claimed they have provided the data consciously and should not start complaining and demanding explanations when the data is subsequently used.

A lot of information however is actually collected without the consent of the individual. Without any real choice. People "provide" personal data only to be able to participate in society. They click on "accept", because they need to be able to download an app or make use of a service.

And even if they would invest time and energy to go through the long legal notices - some even longer than Shakespeare's plays - they would probably not know what is happening and fail to understand their legal abracadabra.

These privacy notices make individuals not see the wood for the trees.

All in all, we are at a crossroads.

We all know very well that trust, both in the private and in the public sector, is of vital importance for our economy and society at large. And we also all know that this trust has received great blows the recent years.

Transparency is the first step to restore trust. People should be told fair and square what will be done with their data. If they understand the purposes, the benefits and risks, of these activities - if they are given a real opportunity to choose - their trust will be regained.

But, in addition to increasing transparency, and upholding other principles underpinning our data protection and privacy laws, by effective supervision on compliance with the law, more is needed.

I truly wish I could tell you that, if we stick to the privacy principles, everything will be just fine. That our principles will function as dikes against the phenomenon of Big Data.

But I am afraid that us righteous supervisory authorities, cannot fight off this man-made tsunami and keep it within socially acceptable bounds. Our dikes are just not high or effective enough.

We cannot close our eyes and go to sleep thinking and saying that our privacy principles are enough to watch over our personal data.

In addition to flexible, but determined lawmakers and regulators, we need a critical mass, that steps up and (re)claims the rights that are under threat from Big Data ; to make people aware of the risks to our intrinsic values that is posed by Big Data and to think together about how we can effectively address these risks and unwanted consequences, we need a fierce social dialogue.

A debate in which not only the bright future of Big Data is painted, but in which the real risks, of discrimination, of abuse by the powerful to the expense of the less fortunate, are mentioned. In which the requirements are formulated to ensure a socially responsible application of this phenomenon.

In my view we need a pamphlet that I have jokingly called "Das Digital". Or to ask Al Gore to make another movie ; "an inconvenient truth 2.0".

Because without this, without a fierce social debate on big data, important and precious qualities of our democratic society will succumb to money, power and indolence.

Thank you.