

On 18 November 2015, a lunch debate on Internet Governance as an Innovation driver organized by Knowledge4Innovation (K4I) in cooperation with IEEE took place in the European Parliament. It was a well-attended, well-balanced event with more than 30 participants from different professional backgrounds including European Commission, the European Parliament, ICANN, IEEE, Digital Europe and civil society.

Victor Negrescu, a Romanian MEP from the S&D (Socialists & Democrats) group, opened the discussion by arguing that the open Internet with its pervasive and expansive reach has the power to transform people's personal and professional lives. It has enabled new level of social engagement and networking; it has generated explosive opportunities in commerce and business development; and has opened new ways of working and leisure.

The "Internet Revolution" has given rise to increasing levels of connectivity that now go beyond the Internet, to the Internet of Things and People. It has given rise to unprecedented open innovation and ideas fueled by connectedness and powered by open access to the Internet.

However, the world of open innovation and collaboration also means massive exchange of captured data and information, which brings up new issues on how that data and information are being stored, accessed and used. Now people enter a world where they will have to weigh the complex risk of such openness to their security, privacy and anonymity. One question prevails-how do we find a balance between the desire and critical global need for an open Internet and the right to protect privacy and ensure anonymity, to safeguard our citizens.

Amongst the participants, there was a broad consensus on the need to follow a multi-stakeholder approach on Internet Governance. The new rising powers on the international chessboard such as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) are edging strongly into the field of Internet Governance. Their role and influence should not be underestimated. They seem to have realized the importance of having a multi-stakeholder approach instead of inter-governmental governance model and this is highly positive. On a similar track, the United States seem to agree that in relinquishing control over the internet in the new year the best model to govern to govern it would be the multi-stakeholders approach.

Data Protection and sharing of data was one central theme of the discussions. It was stressed that people's privacy should be adequately protected. Nowadays, companies use people's personal data in order to make profit. This new business model has serious negative effects to the right of privacy and individual freedoms. Speakers such as IEEE-SA Managing Director, Konstantinos Karachalios, appeared to be totally against such an approach and advocated for the adoption of better technical foundations and standards that cannot be easily manipulated. Although he recognized that people's data should be used in order to be able to survey and tackle criminal activities, he argued that this should be an exemption and not the general rule; in a different situation, democracy would be greatly hindered.

On the opposite of this argument, the Chair of the Market Regulation Group within Digital Europe, Walter van Den Weiden, argued that a balanced approach between data protection and allowing the business to do their jobs should be struck. Finally, Digital Europe advocated for data protection measures that do not create additional burdens and obstacles for businesses.

In addition, speakers gave emphasis on how internet is changing and re-shaping the world and its valuable role in tackling unemployment. Reference to Europe, and specifically Romania, which is rapidly being transformed to an EU Internet hub, was made by DG CONNECT Principal Advisor Megan Richard. At the same time, the importance that the new Commission and personally President Juncker attributes to Internet and the Digital Agenda as a whole was underlined.

ICANN Vice President, Jean Jacque Sahel, argued that Internet is one of the few free places in the world and this liberty should be protected at all costs. Currently internet is completely decentralized, very open and provides unhindered communication. In practice, this means that Internet is Innovation without permission. The world may be slowly shift to governance of the Internet, but still it moves forward without a single central authority, but rather multiple "gate keepers". In his view, this is essential for Internet's further advancement.

The panel also expressed the need for policy makers to take into account the undergoing internet changes and keep up with those. Victor Negrescu (RO, S&D) and Brando Benifei (IT,S&D) pointed out that the European Commission often creates unnecessary complications and proposes complex regulatory frameworks whose immediate effects are questionable. Everyone in the room agreed however that it is necessary to balance the short term and long term approaches.

Finally, Konstantinos Karachalios mentioned that a Westphalian approach to the Internet is being noticed and this is alarming. Some countries are feeling threatened by the Internet and the revolution that is bringing, thus raising walls. The EU should be not fall into this trap. The EU has always been a soft power with norms, respect for human rights and it should not shy away from making use of that power. It should set up rules and regulatory framework and lead by example. The EU should not, under any circumstances, isolate itself from the rest of the world, he concluded.