



Words of greeting to the conference “European Dialogue on Internet Governance“ on 14/15 September 2009 in Geneva

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to start by congratulating the organizers of the European Dialogue on Internet Governance for managing to establish a multi-stakeholder approach. We cannot leave the important issue of the structure and framework of the internet to governments or businesses. What we need is an interdisciplinary discourse that includes users with their specific knowledge and views as consumers, workers and citizens.

As chairman of the services union ver.di, it is my task to represent the interests of our members – some two and a half million in all. These people work in more than 1,000 different occupations, and the technical and legal aspects of the way that communication is structured are of crucial importance for them both as employees and as private citizens.

The question of how we organize information and communications technology is all about how we live and work together – but it is also about the future of democracy and society!

In the past people said that the new information technologies would result in greater democracy. And would give individuals greater scope to determine their own work.

But today we find ourselves fighting to uphold our hard-won basic rights!

With the use of information and communications technologies a frenzy of control has broken out – in government, in industry and at the workplace.

Employers are increasingly treating their employees like feudal serfs. They are using the new technologies to find out: where their employees are, whom they are talking to, whom they are telephoning, whom they are exchanging emails with, what they are thinking, and whether and how they are involved in trade union activities. They are storing data about the causes of their employees' illnesses – information that they should not have access to.

Snooping and general surveillance of employees and private citizens without due suspicion must end!

Employee data protection, freedom of association, freedom of expression and freedom of the press must be strengthened internationally!

At European level in particular we need to have a debate about the architecture of the Internet, the technology involved, how it is organized and what the legal framework should be. We need a democratic planning system for the information society!

This means, amongst other things, that all projects related to e-government and large-scale administrative IT-activities, that all these projects must be checked for their adherence to democratic standards such as open interfaces and licenses, accessibility, participation, data protection and informational self-determination – before they are implemented.

Allow me to make a personal comment; as Germans we know only too well how fragile a democracy is. Just imagine what politically motivated on-line access to centralised data collections containing private information about individuals could lead to – whether the databases involved are government or private ones. Access to information about religion, sexual orientation, health or political beliefs!

We all have a responsibility to create political and organisational structures that can never be misused; neither now nor in the future. This sometimes involves, completely refraining from certain projects. Let me just mention one concept: “Data retention“.

We don't want a society in which everyone has to feel observed and under surveillance! What we want is a society in which people can vigorously and courageously stand up for their rights!

Finally let me say something about industrial democracy:

In Germany, any introduction of technologies that can serve to monitor the performance and behaviour of employees is subject to statutory co-determination – it requires the agreement of workforce representatives. We would like to see this principle applied to all major European IT projects.

In other words, it is high time we started helping policymakers develop a vision of public space on the web.

ver.di has already embarked on this and has drawn up basic guidelines for the “democratic development of web space“ in an information-based society. With our “Berlin Manifesto: Public Services 2.0“ we also want to stimulate discussion about the role of public services in an information-society. The Manifesto is available in several European languages.

I am really sorry that I cannot be with you in person today – but I hope this contribution will help stimulate discussion.

I wish your conference much success!