Data Protection, Privacy and Ethics: Why We Need Interdisciplinary Conversations

On 24 October 2018 the International Conference of Data Protection and Privacy Commissioners hosted a remarkable event in the European Parliament in Brussels. They invited ca. 1,500 experts from the fields of data protection, privacy and digital ethics, and also from different professional areas, such as regulators and governmental authorities, non-governmental organisations, academia, companies and law firms to engage in a global discussion on ‘Ethics – Dignity and Respect in Data Driven Life’. The most prominent speakers at this conference included Giovanni Buttarelli of the EDPS (the European Data Protection Supervisor), Tim Cook of Apple, Sundar Pichai of Google and Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook. All speakers agreed that privacy, as a fundamental right, is becoming more and more important while also concurring that a comprehensive federal privacy law in the United States should seek to use the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as a guiding model.

Interestingly the discourse of this conference did not only focus on international data protection and privacy standards – it went far beyond that. All speakers, no matter if they were representing regulators, multinational companies or academia, emphasised that, together with data protection and privacy, digital ethics will be one the most important topic of the next decade. Giovanni Buttarelli, who started the debate, noted that there is a clear difference between legal compliance and ethical behavior. ‘It is not anymore about compliance with laws. We also have to make sure that the laws we are complying with are ethical. Not everything which is legal is also ethical.’ Echoing Buttarelli, Tim Cook also urged us to go beyond a purely legalistic approach and pointed out that, ‘technology is capable of doing great things. But it does not want to do great things. It does not want anything. That part takes all of us. [...] We have to make technology human. It must respect human values and privacy is part of this.’ Arguing that it is in the interest of companies to respect privacy, Mark Zuckerberg pointed out that ‘users need to trust companies’ and that ‘this is a company's’ biggest incentive to invest in privacy and ethics.’ Anita Allen (Professor of Law and Philosophy, University of Pennsylvania) saw a common theme in our understanding of ethics across the world, despite obvious cultural differences: ‘Ethics are moral cornerstones of society, for example fairness, dignity and humanity. Ethics may differ from culture to culture but have a lot of similarities. We have to act proactively before it is too late.’

The event in Brussels not only showed that everybody recognises the importance of data protection and privacy but also that discussions on data protection are thematically widening to include issues such as dignity and ethics. Furthermore, the event made clear that different disciplines are currently approaching the topic of

digital ethics from different directions, with each field applying a different analytic lens. Finally, the discussion in Brussels demonstrated that discussions on privacy and digital ethics cannot be limited to one country or region. Data protection is an issue which, like climate change, does not respect international borders – our future conversations need to reflect this.

Similarly, discussions must not be limited to consumer trust. In an age of rapidly emerging technology – one must only look at developments in the fields of artificial intelligence, robotics and blockchain – we require an interdisciplinary discourse about emerging technologies and their relationship to privacy and digital ethics. Questions which require thoughtful, detailed and, most importantly, interdisciplinary answers include: How shall personal data be used in an all-connected world? What is the ethics of machines, robots or robotized humans? How will AI transform healthcare, banking and insurances, and what are the ethical limits in these fields? How far can bioengineering and biomedicine go? What are the pros and cons of cryptocurrency regulation? What ethical issues are being raised by the emergence of self-driving cars? How shall autonomous weapons be regulated?

Delphi aims to provide a platform which can develop such discussions and is the first review which explicitly intends to address these topics on a comprehensive and global level. Delphi is an interdisciplinary journal of emerging technologies as seen through the perspectives of experts from the fields of law, ethics, science, technology, economics and business, bringing together authors of different professional backgrounds to share and discuss diverse perspectives and opposing views in a neutral forum. Delphi aims to provide an open forum for big picture thinkers to discuss how emerging technologies could and should shape not only our present but also our future.

I hope you enjoy the inaugural edition of Delphi as much as I did and perhaps are inspired to join the conversation with a contribution of your own. The discussions we have here will tackle some of the most important issues we face over the coming decades and I am excited to be on board from the beginning of this journey. I know it will be an interesting one.

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