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IT'S YOUR CHOICE!

Protecting citizens' rights on the internet

Press release

Governments, police, private companies and even criminals all want access to our personal data, and the internet stores endless details of our private lives that can be used - or abused. MEPs and experts debated the need to protect personal data at a Civil Liberties Committee hearing on 5 March.

A report by Stavros Lambrinidis (PES, GR), adopted unanimously by the committee on 17 February, is the first recommendation by MEPs for reconciling the fight against cybercrime and the rights of surfers: freedom of association and expression, non-discrimination and other rights that can only be defended by EU legislation, as the internet knows no frontiers.

The report, which will be put to the vote at the Strasbourg plenary session in late March, calls on the Member States and the Commission to bring forward proposals to define global standards for protecting data, security and freedom of expression, at a time when our "digital identity is tending to become an integral part of ourselves", says Mr Lambrinidis. The rapporteur considers it essential to define strictly a user's "consent" to share his data, given the unequal balance of powers between users, private companies or governments, he believes.

In Mr Lambrinidis' view, "e-illiteracy will be the illiteracy of the 21st century". He argues that access to the internet, like access to education, should never be blocked by governments or private companies.

Professor Stefano Rodotà, chair of the Scientific Committee of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, maintained that "today nothing is being done to improve the conditions for the democratic functioning of the internet; the focus is on the security aspects (…). Referring to the recent case of the social networking site Facebook, "which tried to appropriate data placed on its network", he argued that "we cannot settle this issue by relying solely upon business law precepts" and that some "critical" content must be treated differently.

The same values apply to the internet as to society at large

European Data Protection Supervisor Peter Hustinx said that "at the beginning it was fashionable to speak of cyberspace, which gave the impression that the internet was different to our world. But now it has become an integral part of our everyday life, it is part of the real world". Therefore "we must apply the same values as we do in our society (…), fundamental rights must apply and that's that", he stated. Nevertheless, the internet does have new features, notably in the area of monitoring responsibility. "In the old world it was fairly simple. On the internet there is a system of layers, responsibility is more complex and therefore tends to vanish. This must be clarified", he argued, although he did not wish to see "an environment of permanent surveillance".

Javier Moreno Sanchez (PES, ES) asked about the possibility of secure electronic voting for expatriates, to prevent fraud. "Electronic voting would increase turnout but it entails major risks", replied Stefano Rodota. He also called for a "quicker and more categorical" approach

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to the protection of minors. Nicolae Vlad Popa (EPP-ED, RO) voiced concern about the increasing number of cases of identity fraud. To this Mr Hustinx answered that it was important "to ensure that the rules on data protection are applied".

Data retention directive: "we must change course"

Gus Hosein of Privacy International was "bothered by the fact that the EU has taken over from the Bush administration" as regards data retention, pointing, inter alia, to the data retention directive. "Is that what you want to export to the rest of the world? The EU should be a ray of light for human rights but at the moment it's the opposite (…) we must change course and the Lambrinidis report is the opportunity to turn things round", he said. This view was backed by Professor Steve Peers of Essex University, who presented the key points of his study on strengthening security and fundamental freedoms on the internet and EU policy on combating cyber-crime.

Jim Killock, of the Open Rights Group, believed it was also important "to ensure that a charter of rights comes into being very soon". He invited the EU institutions to look into the case of the United Kingdom, where "the Oyster Card *(editor's note: the electronic travel card used for public transport in London)* enabled over 400 pieces of information to be transmitted to the police in a few months".

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