

Report – Finnish Internet Forum 2019

The Finnish Internet Forum (FIF) celebrated its 10th anniversary in the Little Parliament (annex to the Parliament Building) on 6 June 2019. The seminar was hosted by Julf Helsingius. To mark the festive year, Yrjö Länsipuro had compiled a review of the history of the internet and of earlier FIF seminars. The book was published at the event and copies were handed out to the participants of the seminar. The venue was nearly full and a live webcast of the event was followed by more than 300 people in at least 15 countries. Interpretation was provided and it proved very useful, indeed. A recording of the event and of many previous FIF seminars is available on the website of the Finnish Parliament.

Sabina Lindström: The role and regulation of the internet in the EU

The seminar was opened by Sabina Lindström, Director-General of the Networks Department at the Ministry of Transport and Communications. In her opening words, she emphasised the importance of good regulation in the development of the internet. Common rules and regulation are needed but, according to Lindström, it is important to avoid over-regulation and to ensure that regulation enables technological development while protecting the users of the internet. Lindström said that those responsible for regulation should adopt the role of an enabler so that people will be able to take full advantage of the internet. Both EU-wide and global cooperation are needed.

Andrew Sullivan: Regulation, governance, and the shared fate of the internet

In his keynote speech, Andrew Sullivan, CEO of the Internet Society, discussed the regulation and future of the internet. Sullivan stressed that the internet is a transformative technology that has revolutionised people's lives in the same way that automobiles did in the mid-1900s. Sullivan noted that the internet must be regulated but that the regulation must be well considered and appropriate. The internet is still a relatively young technology and people barely understand what its potential benefits are. He stressed that even if the negative side effects and threats of the internet are much discussed in public, the internet has produced also many positive things. According to Sullivan, guaranteeing access to the internet to everyone is key in maximising its benefits, and he mentioned Finland as a model for other countries. The internet must remain open and available to everyone and it must be regulated in such a way that the benefits it has brought will not be lost. Sullivan said that effective regulation must offer positive incentives and that regulation must be prepared in cooperation with different stakeholders.

Panel discussion: The era of artificial intelligence and EU Digital Single Market

The first panel discussion was moderated by Tapani Tarvainen. The panellists exchanged views on AI and the EU's digital single market from the perspective of various concerns and threats. The panellists were Marjut Salokannel, Founding Partner of Sareco; Taneli Tikka, CEO of the State Business Development Company; Antti Peltomäki, Head of the Representation of the European Commission in Finland; and Andrew Sullivan, CEO of the Internet Society. Their first topic of discussion focused on concerns relating to privacy protection and, for example, the use of AI in decision-making in light of the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The use of AI in decision-making is problematic because, for instance, if datasets are biased, decisions will be biased and discriminating. They also discussed possible threats arising from AI when it comes to freedom of expression, ethics, and competition and consumers, and the role of regulation in the development of AI and in responding to the threats. In addition to addressing various threats and concerns, the panellists raised for discussion the potential opportunities and new and rapidly developing technologies that can be used to control the threats.

Raimo Kantola: 5G and net neutrality

Raimo A. Kantola, Professor of Networking Technology at Aalto University, held a keynote speech on new 5G technology and its relationship with the network neutrality regulation of the EU. According to Kantola, 5G technology upgrades the current technology to a new level in that it shortens delays and improves the speed of data transfer, for instance. Thanks to this, both consumers and industries can utilise the new-generation web. 5G technology can also improve data security, which is important in our world where the interface between digital and physical worlds is blurred. However, Kantola invited people to consider the compatibility of 5G and the EU's net neutrality rules. The current legislation favours global technology giants, weakens data security, and gives China the benefits of domestic market in the EU.

Panel discussion: How do democratic societies cope with the challenges of the open internet?

The panellists approached the topic through four themes, which each of them discussed briefly at first. Jessikka Aro, a journalist at the Finnish Broadcasting Company Yle, opened the discussion by bringing up the question of how the Western countries are coping with the external influencing enabled by open internet, and she called for better regulation by social media companies. After her, Martti J. Kari, University Teacher from the University of Jyväskylä, spoke about Russia's isolation and about the building of a sovereign internet, and explored the reasons underlying Russia's disinformation campaigns. Jouni Mölsä, former Director General of Communications at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, approached the subject matter from the political point of view, and opened discussion on how open internet access has changed and is changing policy-making. According to Mölsä, democratic societies are resilient and sustain open internet access, but they must adapt to the changes in their environment. Thomas Myrup, Director of EU Affairs at Facebook, opened discussion on the responsibility of platforms, such as Facebook. According to Kristensen, in its capacity as a platform company, Facebook recognises its responsibility and invests in efforts to root out the problems mentioned in the panel and does not regard regulation as a bad thing but rather as an instrument for resolving problems. However, the panel called into question whether Facebook is doing enough and doubted if its statements correspond to what is taking place in reality.

Overview of the past 10 years and the near future: FIF and the internet

Yrjö Länsipuro and Julf Helsingius looked back on the transformation of the internet over the past decade. One feature is the deviation of public discussion away from the potential of the internet towards potential threats that it poses and to combating them. There is less discussion about the technical guidance and more about the content of the internet. Moreover, regulation is no more used as a swear word but it is even expected – however, in a controlled manner. Big platform companies are more loudly in favour of regulation than small actors. The multi-stakeholder model has proved to be a wise option but even it involves difficult aspects of its own in terms of decision-making. The media is facing a totally new situation and journalists are in short supply. In a way, the EU is caught between a rock and a hard place in that, for example China is exporting a well-productised internet approach, controlled by the state, to Africa, for instance, while in Europe people hope that more rules would be laid down to help minimise the downsides of the internet. Open internet access is also in decline as users are moving to network environments provided by big platforms.