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Internet Freedom



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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today I'm going to talk to you about freedom online. Why it matters: why we must protect it: and how we are doing that.

I know that many of you at re:publica already campaign for Internet freedom. Don't stop! The Internet is the new frontier of freedom, in Western democracies but also around the world.

It is changing the politics and economics of the world. And some find that change too disruptive, too challenging, and want to stop it.

But remember how many kinds of freedom we can promote and protect online. Fundamental freedoms – like freedom of speech, and the right to privacy. The freedom to innovate, and to be rewarded and recognised for your own bright ideas in the way you think fit. And the freedom of the Internet architecture as a whole.

Yes the Internet should be open; and yes it should be free. But that is not the same as being a lawless wild west.

We have recently seen how many thousands of people are willing to protest against rules which they see as constraining the openness and innovation of the Internet. This is a strong new political voice. And as a force for openness, I welcome it, even if I do not always agree with everything it says on every subject. We are now likely to be in a world without SOPA and without ACTA. Now we need to find solutions to make the Internet a place of freedom, openness, and innovation fit for all citizens, not just for the techno avant-garde.

The fact is that, sometimes, online activities have real-world implications. Like it or not, people sometimes use online tools to conspire for horrific crimes like murder or child abuse.

Others launch cyber-attacks to breach or destabilise Internet systems: attacks which increasingly impact on people's daily lives, as ever more transactions go digital.

I know that this is the tiny minority of online activity. And I know that we cannot overreact: as in other fields of life, we must balance liberty and security.

But neither can we ignore it.

The Internet has become too important to just leave its future to good fortune. That is why we must recognise rights and responsibilities online — for an online world that is an increasingly important part of our society.

Today, I would like to focus on the future, on the chance for Internet freedom to unlock Europe's potential.

Increasingly, people are realising that the web is capable of powering seemingly infinite innovation. That we don't have to be constrained by the habits of the past – but can be released by the opportunities of the future. That whole industries once based on limitation and control could now be based on customer focus, sharing and interactivity.

Freedom online can deliver that potential to innovate: but systems that are dated, closed or complex can strangle it.

What can freedom online give us?

For one thing, a huge economic boost. An open Internet can power innovation, surge productivity. And can put innovation tools into the hands of ordinary, enterprising people.

That's why I'm convinced web entrepreneurs are the key to our future growth. And I want to make sure they have the tools to innovate.

These people can do amazing things; if the only barrier was their creativity and imagination, we'd have no problem at all.

But I know there are other barriers. Entrepreneurs need the tools to network better – and I'm working on that. They need the credit and political recognition they deserve: and our recent Tech All-Stars competition is looking for Europe's hottest start-up talent. And they need our universities to be innovation hubs, inspiring and empowering the innovators of tomorrow; I'm working on that too.

And I'm also working on open standards for open markets.

We still haven't completed our telecoms Single Market: a recent study showed that this could be costing us as much as 110 billion euros per year.

So this year we will engage with European standardisation bodies and the industry to determine the best way forward. For standards that means content providers and operators can get a uniform service offering, avoid duplicate charges, and exploit economies of scale.

We also need to preserve openness of access to Internet services: what some call net neutrality. People need transparent offers, so they know they are getting what they pay for. They need to be able to easily switch providers or deals if they don't like the service they are getting. And they need to always have the option of accessing the full, unlimited, best-efforts internet, if that's what they want.

But most of all, web entrepreneurs need us to identify and deal with the barriers that stand in their way of their online freedom.

Obstacles like complicated and incompatible systems for identifying, paying, and licensing; like 27 different sets of rulebooks when there could be one. All these things can crush innovation, and keep bright ideas confined in unprofitable national markets.

Because freedom also means the freedom to innovate in business models.

One by one, different sectors are facing up to new online realities. To the decline of old ways of doing business – and the rise of new opportunities. The music sector realised this long ago; other sectors like audiovisual are now starting to. Our Media Futures forum is looking at how this applies to the media sector in general.

Of course, changing for the digital age doesn't mean always giving material away free of charge. But it does mean we need to be open to new approaches: new ways to distribute, new ways to be rewarded for work, and new ways for people to access great online content easily.

Sometimes people are prevented from making this change by out-of-date rules and practices — like those on copyright licensing. Other times it's just that they need a change of mindset – that they are too comfortable with old habits to realise the world has changed.

Either way, we need to wake up and smell the coffee. This is why I am frustrated about the lack of progress in creating a genuine digital Single Market.

If we're really going to help a free Internet, and help web entrepreneurs in particular, we must promote an open culture.

In particular, I think public sector data is a goldmine just sitting there. If we unlock it, we could boost creativity, boost the economy, and boost democratic accountability.

That's why we've proposed legal changes that will show the way forward on open data. Making data cheaper and easier to re-use, meaning more data sets, with less complicated conditions.

It's not just about unlocking new data sets. It's about promoting a whole new attitude within governments about openness online; creating a new fuel for innovation within our Single Market.

I admit, this would in one sense be a relatively modest step. But it is an important one, effecting the change to an open mindset. And it could be a prelude to the wider work needed on copyright reform.

At the moment it's still just a proposal on open data. Before becoming law, it needs the democratic scrutiny and approval of European Parliament and national governments in Council.

I'm convinced of the benefits; I'm convinced of the public's appetite for change. So I am calling on those institutions to agree the proposal swiftly and ambitiously.

And if you have ideas on how we can make it more convincing to them, please let us know.

But of course there is another, very significant thing we mean by freedom online. It's about being free to express yourself: a fundamental right, and a pillar of democracy. We must defend it: online and off.

Last year, Hungary introduced a new media law. Significant parts were incompatible with European law. Not least because rules about registration and balanced reporting could have imposed heavy obligations on all kinds of online content, from online forums to personal blogs. So I pushed for and achieved changes to those proposed rules.

And since then, Hungary's own constitutional court has ruled that the new law unconstitutionally limited freedom also for the written press. Both the European Commission and the Council of Europe continue to have concerns that this law is not fully compatible with our European norms – the Hungarian government needs to do more.

This is an important area: clearly there are high public expectations for the EU's ability to act. But equally, we can only enforce fundamental rights in areas subject to EU law. So we need to think seriously about whether the EU has sufficient powers in this area.

In the EU, of course, our freedom of speech is protected by law. All actions take place within a framework of safeguards and legal protections, as well as a well-established political culture that favours openness. That gives me confidence that problems that arise can be fixed through a combination of legal tools and political dialogue.

As you might know, yesterday was UN World Press Freedom Day– a day to remind us that around the world people (including journalists and bloggers) do not always enjoy the same rights we have in the EU. One example is Eynulla Fatullayev, an Azerbaijani journalist and human rights activist and this year's winner of the UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize – my congratulations for his brave work. Indeed, many don't always have the right to an open democratic debate, nor the legal protections of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, nor safeguards like oversight and recourse.

In spite of that – indeed because of it – in such places, the right to express oneself is all the more important. For those who struggle for democracy, we must ensure they have a voice.

The Internet can give them that voice. We saw that with the Arab Spring.

The Internet alone didn't cause that uprising: it's much more complicated than that. But clearly online platforms gave protestors a means to organise, and a harness for the power of a surging desire for democracy.

In Egypt, the government tried to turn off the Internet in a failed attempt to silence discontent. Elsewhere, despotic governments use communications technology as a tool of surveillance and repression.

We cannot allow that to happen. Where countries struggle for democracy, I want to ensure there is "No Disconnect". And we will be doing that in many different ways. By supporting those brave human rights defenders who work against cyber-censorship in undemocratic regimes. Through human rights guidelines to ensure EU companies play their part. And through European and international coordination.

There's one final point I'd like to make today about freedom. Too often, freedom and security are caricatured as incompatible alternatives. As though measures to ensure one can only be at the expense of the other.

In fact the opposite is true. Because there is no freedom without security; these concepts are interdependent and complementary.

I may have the legal right to walk down a particular road at night : but am I truly free to do so, if it is not safe?

Likewise, people aren't really going to use the internet freely, unless they know they are in control of their privacy – that their personal data will be handled transparently and fairly.

That interdependence is why liberty and security are mentioned in the very same Article, the very same sentence, of the European Convention on Human Rights.

On Wednesday, we launched our strategy to create a better Internet for kids.

For me, this is crucial. Safety is all the more important for the most vulnerable, and assuring this is everyone's civic responsibility .

At the same time, I realise that the online world can be a great place for kids to discover, learn, interact and create. But only when they have the confidence to freely explore.

There are two main strands to my philosophy here. First, we must avoid crushing the openness and freedom that drives online innovation. To avoid collateral damage to the Internet architecture.

Second, we must acknowledge that we can never totally eliminate risks for children: we can just reduce them.

Sadly, children will always face risks online: just as they will always face risks, like traffic, in the real world.

Rather we need simple tools, that educate and empower children, and enable them to deal with those risks. Just as we do in the "offline" world.

I am pleased that the leading Internet companies have joined a coalition to make the Internet a Better Place for Children. They are working together to develop solutions, before the end of the year, to empower parents and children.

That is my vision for a free and open Internet, at once a vehicle for innovation, a platform for free expression, and a place to exercise the liberties ensured through safety and security.

The best thing about the Internet is that it is open: and I intend to keep it that way.