

Next generation internet summit: A digital future with high hopes

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Opinion

Frans Timmermans' vision of the future is technology-driven, but people-centred.



Frans Timmermans | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

Usually when a clutch of European Commissioners are paraded at some 'high level' event in Brussels it's a safe bet to expect said EU officials' speeches will have been scrubbed clean of anything provocative or remotely interesting. It's a rare experience indeed to actually come out of one of these events with a smile on your face and a bit of a spring in your step.

Maybe it was the shrewd framing of the topic by former Commission Director General Robert Madelin that caught the speech writers' imagination. Or perhaps it really was a case of, "What's that guys, an event on the future of the internet? Sure, say what you want...no problem".

The Commission's second in command, Frans Timmermans, took time out from castigating Poland to deliver a speech that was as open, inventive and personal as any you'll hear this year.

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Addressing delegates at the recent Next Generation Internet summit in the European Parliament, the Dutch official invoked images of wizards and presidents, robots and philosophers, fanatics and scientists as he took the audience on a personal journey to a future that's people-centred.

Against the backdrop of terror attacks across Europe and political turmoil in the UK, Timmermans had this to say about the six decades since the end of the Second World War: "We have built a continent open and free. Where democracy reigns. Where there is no death penalty. Where we couple the power of the free market with the responsibility of social governance. A truly unique accomplishment that I frankly believe we should be more proud of."

And looking to the future, he reflected on how of the past inventiveness had benefitted Europe: "Over the ages, innovation has improved our lives. We live longer. Fewer people starve.

"I look to innovation and technology to continue to feed us all, to cure old and new diseases, to generate renewable energy to protect our planet, to educate new generations of citizens who have to navigate in choppier seas of information, to map the helixes of life, our earth, our universe, and of course to protect humankind from natural dangers, but also from itself. So I welcome disruption."

But, he warned, change often comes at a price. "It is great when robots do our laundry and other chores. But what does it mean for people whose jobs can be automated? It is great when people all around the world can meet and talk through the internet.

"But what about when extremists and terrorists can preach, recruit and marshal their moronic minions to kill and maim in the streets of London, Brussels or Paris? What happens once we reach the pivotal point when AI becomes smarter than us? Some say God created man, and then man rejected God. Today we create sophisticated algorithms... Can they one day reject us?"

As technology surges forward, Timmermans suggested, "we need to take a step back and look in the mirror. Are our ethics, our norms, our laws adapted to these new developments? Can we still be sure that we - we humans - will still control technology?"

Technology, he warned, "has no innate morality. Nuclear power can cure and it can kill. Innovation above all is a moral and political challenge. The next generation internet must be more than the Internet of Things. It must be the Internet of Values."

This, he argued, primarily means protecting democracy. "In Europe, we are perhaps too used to living in a free, peaceful and open society.

"But nothing is irreversible, nothing unbreakable, nothing inevitable. And the fourth industrial revolution also carries the risk of our democracies being hacked. Hacked, by inequality, by the ever-greater power and money in the hands of a few mighty internet giants.

"Hacked, in very literal terms, by hackers and trolls disrupting politics at home and abroad or waging a hybrid war. Hacked by the internet echo chambers, that stop us from listening to each other and seeing each other, By the new illiteracy: the inability to tell fact from fiction, the loss of critical thinking."

Democracy, he argued, would only remain viable if no one gets left behind in the rush towards a digital future. "Uber might put taxi drivers out of a job - but then driverless cars may put Uber drivers out of a job.

"Sure, new jobs will be created. But as so often, those with the least education and lowest incomes stand to suffer the most.

"We say to people: learning becomes a life-long duty. You must adapt. You must be flexible. Which is true. But at the same time our mortgages, our rents, are not flexible. Nor is our insurance, our groceries, or the schooling of our kids.

"This poses a challenge. If we want to become more flexible, it is inevitable to start thinking about things like universal basic income. To create enough stability to allow us to be more flexible."

Touching on populism, idealism and gender equality and taking a moment to stick the boot into President Trump, Timmermans closed saying he had high hopes for the next generation internet. "It's the next generation of Europeans who will make the next generation internet.

"Europe is their natural habitat. So let us move forward into the future with high hopes, let us embrace disruption, but let us also heed the words of one of the greatest minds of our time [Einstein], who said, 'Concern for man and his fate must always form the chief interest of all technical endeavours. Never forget this in the midst of your diagrams and equations.'"

About the author

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