

Building a digital world but based on our own values

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The year started at a gallop. People from around the world asked Sitra's views concerning the utilisation of data and data economy. We planned trips and organised international workshops. The cooperation with various ministries during Finland's EU presidency bore fruit, and the theme of human-driven and fair data economy based on European values and regulation appeared to recur in several communications, white papers and strategies issued by the European Commission.

The Communication from the European Commission "Shaping Europe's digital future" COM (2020) 67 was issued in February 2020. Digital technologies have changed our daily life, our way of working and doing business, and the way we travel, communicate and relate with each other. In the communication, the ongoing change is compared with the industrial revolution. Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the Commission, has emphasised in her political guidelines that "Europe must lead the transition to a healthy planet and a new digital world."

Then the world stopped. First it just slowed down, and then the disbelief that the coronavirus situation was "really happening to us" took the breath away from citizens, employees and entrepreneurs. A vacuum was created with a large question mark: "what does this mean in practice?" As always, the vacuum filled quickly. It filled with different solution proposals, the varied opinions and funny memes of social media channels and the crisis projects and actions launched by different authorities. Quick solutions are sought and decisions transforming our lives are made daily.

Exceptional circumstances challenging the digital future

On 19 March, the Financial Times website published Yuval Noah Harari's excellent article on the world after the coronavirus. He reminded us that the effects of the crisis extend beyond the economy to politics and culture. According to Harari, we will make a choice these weeks

between two progress models: will we add totalitarian surveillance or empower citizens to act on their own initiative? A motivated and well-informed population will tolerate the crisis better. This requires the maintenance of trust in science, official authority and the media. According to Harari, the crisis will also determine whether we will travel quickly down the route of disunity or find a route back to the path of global solidarity.

In normal times it could take years to get reforms through, but in a state of emergency, they are passed in a matter of hours. “When people are given a choice between privacy and health, they will usually choose health,” Harari writes. In a just world, they should be able to choose both. Digitalisation is a significant factor for the sustainable future of healthcare, but it also includes many alarming elements that should be discussed. Could the European value base act as a mirror when we create a new post-crisis digital future?

After the initial shock, different networks started working promptly. The good experiences of Singapore and other countries are available in Europe: to solve the crisis, the WHO has recommended the “trace, test, isolate” strategy. It is a method enabling the breaking of the infection chain and a safer return to work for people who have achieved health and immunity, i.e. a quicker recovery for the world. There are several solution methods, typically including manual tracing, mobile network location and the building of a smart phone app. In terms of privacy protection, accuracy and scalability, the development of a mobile phone app has proved the most sustainable solution. The MyData community works actively using the methods of citizen science and explores ways to balance health and privacy protection and create new, sustainable digital solutions to the fight against the coronavirus. This is the right way to build a digital future.

The control goes “under the skin”

We have hitherto been horrified at the surveillance cameras and the social credit system of the Chinese government, but it may be even scarier to think of a world where sensors measure our body temperature and the analytics go under our skin. What really got me thinking in Harari’s article was the part where he said that fever and a cough are biological phenomena and reminded us that so are anger, joy, boredom and love. They show as changes in our bodies. What if the surveillance performed during an exceptional situation becomes the “new normal”? What if those in power in the future follow the reactions of citizens and punish dissidents because our bodies reveal our real feelings even if we keep our poker face?

I returned to the Commission's communication and read it from a new perspective. The Commission is striving for a European society driven by digital solutions aligning with our shared values. The Commission wants to see a digital Europe built on openness, justice, diversity, democracy and trust.

Pursuing technology for the good of the people

In the next five years, the Commission will focus on three key objectives in order to ensure that digitalisation respects European values, i.e. the citizens' values.

- Technology for the good of the people
- Just and competitive economy
- Open, democratic and sustainable society

“Technology for the good of the people” is a major requirement. Technology and digitalisation naturally bring novel benefits, but it should also maintain the consumers' feeling of security. As the Commission states, the feeling of security is not just a question of cybersecurity but citizens must be able to trust the technology itself and the way it is used. Consumers must be able to trust digital products and services as much as other products and services. The Commission's objective that European values and ethical rules and social and environmental norms be applied also in the digital space is to be endorsed.

I will compare the Commission's communication to the Nordic Health 2030 vision work, which I participated in last year. The Nordic Health movement also has noble objectives as it strives to create an economically sustainable future in which we will live in a more healthy way as part of healthier communities. Its main objective is to change the way healthcare functions and direct resources to preventive operations. This requires a new social contract, individual-oriented data collection models and business models encouraging more sustainable activity.

Against the vision, it is interesting to follow the way the Nordic countries handle the corona crisis. How does it show shared Nordic values, such as trust, all-round education, responsibility, openness, creativity and innovation? Does the strong trust in official authority in the Nordic countries affect the methods of crisis control? What differences are there between the Nordic countries and the rest of Europe? Above all, does the value base manifest in our

ways of solving the crisis in a sustainable way so that we can utilise technologies safely, balancing health and privacy protection?

As Harari starts his article: “This storm will pass. But the choices we make now could change our lives for years to come.” I think the future of digitalisation must therefore be shaped to match our value base.

Further reading

- Sitra’s fair data economy project: <https://www.sitra.fi/en/topics/fair-data-economy/>
- Communication from the Commission “Shaping Europe's digital future”
<https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2020/EN/COM-2020-67-F1-EN-MAIN-PART-1.PDF>
- Financial Times, Harari’s article <https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75>
- Nordic Health 2030 Movement <http://nordichealth2030.org/about/>