

Europe: EU seeks right privacy trade-off for Internet of Things

By Asta Puraite



The EU Commission launched - on 12 April 2012 - a consultation on wirelessly connected devices (the 'Internet of Things') seeking comments on privacy and information security issues, among others. The Commission aims to 'unleash the potential economic and societal benefits of the Internet of Things (IoT), whilst ensuring an adequate level of control of the devices gathering, processing and storing information.

The IoT is described as a future where everyday devices are connected to the internet through smart chips, and can collect and share data without the intervention of humans. The data collected by smart devices may reveal information on individuals, their habits, location, interests and other personal data. Smart devices may share data automatically, potentially without humans being aware of it, for example, if a university teacher cancels a morning lecture because they are sick, students' alarm clocks and coffee machines could automatically be reset, giving them an extra hour in bed.

"The policy challenge is to assess the right trade-off between the potential economic and societal benefits, and the control that we want to retain over an environment where machines will gather, exchange, process and store information automatically", read a statement by the Commission. "The effects on our private and public space require that people and their governments debate the appropriate governance and management of the IoT in the future." It is expected that by 2015, there will be 25 billion wirelessly connected devices in the world. This number is expected to grow to 50 billion by 2020.

The EU Commission aims to identify how far the deployment of IoT system requires change to the EU approach to data protection and privacy. The consultation asks whether it is acceptable that data is used beyond the sole purpose of an application, whether additional principles and requirements are necessary in addition to traditional data protection principles, and if so, which additional principles should be included. The Commission is also seeking comments on whether specific Data Protection Impact Assessments guides should be developed for IoT-based applications, and whether IoT-based applications should drive information security.

'At a minimum, the confidentiality, integrity and availability of IoT data and services must be safeguarded', read the consultation. 'User authentication, device and data authenticity, and data quality must be ensured. At the same time, the data source has to be trusted, while unauthorised modifications of the data have to be prevented'.

Neelie Kroes, Vice-President of the Commission responsible for the Digital Agenda for Europe, said: "An Internet of Things with intelligence embedded into everyday objects is the next big thing. I want to

promote an Internet of Things that serves our economic and societal goals, whilst preserving security, privacy and the respect of ethical values."

The consultation closes on 12 July 2012, and the results will feed into the Commission's Recommendation on the IoT, which will be presented by summer 2013. The Recommendation will be the follow-up to the Commission's Communication on IoT published in 2009 (IP/09/952).

A January 2012 Report by the Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development (OECD) entitled 'Machine-to-Machine Communication: Connecting Billions of Devices' examined the Internet of Things and explored the future of machine to machine communication, with a particular focus on mobile wireless networks. The OECD stated that privacy and security, and access to public sector information will be among the main areas that will need to be evaluated. 'It is not enough to look only at the service itself', read the report. 'The sharing and combining of data, through cloud services, will increase the locations and jurisdictions where personal data resides.

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