User rights and our digital future – How can we cover the impossible as much as possible?

The starting point

More and more we all recognize that our future will mainly be a digital future. But then user rights for this digital future are a key part of our life as individuals and as citizens of local, national and global societies. Furthermore we know that rights are an essential factor for present action and planning of the future in society, business, industry and daily life.

Unfortunately these critical rights are dealing with a matter that is very unclear. At present, the digital world and its effect on our daily life is progressing at incredible and even further increasing speed. This relates to change, dissemination and penetration of all areas and has fundamental importance for economic, political and social power. But even experts have only a very unclear idea what the digital future will be like (see CECUA October 2014).

At first glance in this situation it is even more difficult to consider related issues like user rights, accessibility, internet governance, security and data protection. But doing nothing is the worst solution. It is indispensable to care about the issue, to deal with different aspects and alternatives and to prepare our future properly as far as possible.

What are the possible approaches?

One possible approach is to look at it from a distance and to keep away from the details. With adequate abstraction many issues have long-term importance. The innovation of products doesn’t always include the innovation of corresponding rules and furthermore many rules can be derived from other general rules (see CECUA Webnews 2017-02 by Friedrich Dittmer).

On the other hand special future issues have to be considered in detail even if partly covered by general rules, for example Accessibility (see CECUA Webnews 2017-01 by Luís Fernández-Sanz) and Security (CECUA Webnews 2016-12 by Bruno Vogel).

Of course, also the mechanisms of the markets make a significant contribution. Products that are in line with user requirement and that provide the best benefits for users have advantages in the market. This mechanism is important but not sufficient.

What should we do?

Looking forward to user rights and digital future we should not forget lessons that can be learned from the past. On the other hand new challenges need adequate measures and we should not underestimate the tremendous dynamics and the importance of the future development.

A number of recommendations can be derived from the arguments mentioned above:
- Efforts must be increased considerably, otherwise we are losing ground in the ongoing race.
- Experiences and conclusions from the past should be considered
- Some conclusions should base on a general view that keeps away from the details.
- Programs and specialized action are necessary for many special issues (see above).
- Market mechanisms have to be taken into account.

CECUA will continue to pursue the topic and its challenges on behalf of users/consumers/citizens.

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