



ACADEMIA ENGELBERG

Engelberg, 16 October 2003

2nd Dialogue on Science in Engelberg

Are Computers Diluting Authority?

At the Public Evening of Academia Engelberg on 15 October 2003 in the Hotel Europe in Engelberg, scientists, hackers, data protection specialists and others engaged in deep discussions on whether the rapid technological development of microprocessors which, for example, trigger the release of the airbag in cars or allow the location of mobile phones to be identified is a blessing, a curse or science fiction.

Over 200 participants followed the arena-like discussion, which was led with consummate skill by Ellinor von Kauffungen. The sceptics, in the form of Professor Hilty from EMPA, Andy Müller-Maguhn, Chaos Computer Club, and Dr. Beat Rudin, Foundation for Data Protection and Information Security (*Stiftung Datenschutz und Informationssicherheit*), were impressive in the presentation of their fears: "We are already in a position today where we have to adapt to technology in many areas". As an example, they cited those computer programs which autonomously decide what the user may do and what he may not do or the refrigerator which autocratically places orders.

Let's take advantage of the benefits

Professor Elgar Fleisch, University of St. Gallen, warned against blanket doom and gloom attitudes towards technological innovation, pointing out that "those who stick their heads in the sand tend to restrict their vision a little". The same line was taken by Professor Günter Müller, University of Freiburg and Professor Gerhard Tröster, ETH Zürich. Professor Müller pointed to the enormous advantages of pervasive computing in medicine. For example, patient observation – monitoring of heart rate and blood pressure – can be done remotely. Professor Tröster himself wore a belt computer of this kind. This prototype provides the opportunity for surveillance – or health monitoring – of patients who have suffered a myocardial infarction. Through the optimization of processes, shorter waiting times in hospitals are also made possible by the connectedness and autonomous communication between computers.

Taking responsibility

A critical warning voice came from philosopher Professor Christoph Hubig from the University of Stuttgart. "In a number of areas we are performing something of a balancing act," he said. "We want our privacy to remain protected; but when it is a question of criminals, people want all possible data to be made available. Or we appreciate the airbag in the car, but do not want any microchips in our clothes that display our stress symptoms because this would make us even more stressed". He also warned against surrendering authority to machines. "If the machine decides for us, then ultimately we lose our faculties".

Awareness must be increased

Finally, Dr. Dominik Galliker from Academia Engelberg briefly summarized the conclusions of the discussion: "As the various examples have shown, these technological developments offer huge opportunities, but also carry risks. These developments are still some way from technical maturity, as shown by the example of the car in which the fuel gauge only works when the left-hand door is opened. The public must be aware of what this computerization has in store for them. Our society must define what is useful and desirable and what is technically feasible but ethically unacceptable." The discussion was closed late in the evening with an invitation to the public to use the nightcap which was offered as an opportunity for further discussions.

<Kasteninformation> Academia Engelberg – A Portrait

The "Science and Trust" Dialogue is an annual conference held over several days in the autumn in the monastery village of Engelberg with the purpose of promoting dialogue between science and society. The Academia Engelberg aims to build bridges and to strengthen mutual trust through dialogue. Fundamental issues on the sociopolitical, ethical, economic and ecological effect of progress in science are addressed on a high level of debate. The conference is interdisciplinary and brings together participants from various nations, cultures and religions. Particular emphasis is placed on contact between the generations. Top representatives from the world of science meet present and future leaders from politics, business, culture and society with the aim of exchanging ideas, deepening mutual understanding and elaborating sets of demands and projects.

The seat of the Academia Engelberg Foundation, established on 27 September 2001, is in the Abbey of Engelberg/CH. Founding members are the cantons of Central Switzerland Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Obwalden, Nidwalden, and Zug, the commune of Engelberg and the Swiss Re Insurance Company, Zürich, with official Swiss federal support (Science and Research Group).

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