

Speech Rector Magnificus Hester Bijl, 2 February 2022

Symposium Technology and privacy: trust or mistrust.  
Welcome to our symposium: Technology and privacy, trust or mistrust.

Here we are at an online meeting in Teams: joined by technology, with many of us working from home. We will be recording this session – and we hope you will trust us, or do you think this is an invasion of your privacy? This, in a nutshell, is what we will be discussing this afternoon.

As technology is an increasing part of our daily life, in society at large, in companies and at our university. Technology and privacy, trust or mistrust is a crucial and urgent topic. Recently, this urgency became excruciatingly apparent in our community with the outcry about our classroom scanners. These were installed to count people in classrooms to monitor how busy they are, which is important for our safety in these times of coronavirus. This outcry will not have escaped your attention. At the moment the scanners have been switched off and we are performing extra safety checks.

During the sometimes heated discussions about the scanners, my perspective on the issue changed. It went from: we need to explain ourselves better, with regard to our intentions, how the scanners work and the decision process – which did include the University Council; to, what I believe is a better understanding of the concerns. It became clear that there are different opinions within our community. There were people, less present in the media, who embraced this counting technology, especially to monitor the coronavirus measures – it made them feel safe. They told us they did not understand the commotion. But there also were parts of our community, students AND staff members, who clearly feared for their privacy, for misuse beyond counting and for a slippery slope towards a most undesirable situation. Different perspectives of trust and mistrust.

I also realised that from a scientific point of view, we also have many different perspectives. What a treasure it is that as a university we

have so many researchers from a wide range of disciplines who have very relevant things to say about this. From cyber security to humanities, from law to psychology and from data science to political science, and probably more. And that is how the idea for an academic symposium and exchange of ideas was born. Connecting researchers with experts in ICT and data protection, and discussing the matter with our academic community: for me this symposium is a good example of connecting – one of the themes of our new strategic plan.

The topic of today is explicitly broader than the classroom scanners, although they certainly present an interesting case study. The crucial question is how do we together ensure that we reap the benefits from certain technologies in a way that we create trust, and safeguard our values?

Because we HAVE and WANT to use new technologies. Without tools and our options for online teaching and video conferencing, the university would have come to a complete stop during the pandemic. Imagine how we would have coped if Covid had struck in the early nineties - when I was studying. I find that hard to imagine. Technology has been a real blessing now, also in our private lives, with most of us relying heavily on our mobile phone to store loads of data and use social media on a daily basis.

These technologies are embraced by some and viewed by suspicion by others. They can offer a solution to certain problems, but can create new ones too. Because how should the data that are collected be handled and protected? Who has access to the data and what does this mean for privacy? These questions came up in the discussion about classroom scanners but are more broadly relevant too.

There are technological, legal, cyber security and social and political aspects. And many more I have probably failed to mention. This is where the strength of our broad comprehensive university comes in handy. We have so much expertise on this! With this symposium we give our researchers and experts the floor to discuss the matter from their academic perspective. Then they will have the opportunity to interact with one another other and with the audience. While looking

for speakers and talking to the deans and others, I received so many suggestions that I could fill three days. We had to choose. Maybe this is a start, and we can repeat it. Learn and improve the formula.

Due to the pandemic we are so limited in attendance that we thought it better to hold this fully online. Unfortunately, this will make dynamic interaction more difficult. But the programme gives enough space for discussions – our chair for today, Pieter Slaman, will tell you more about this and he will ensure that there is room for questions. I myself hope to learn from these different perspectives today, from the interaction with one another and the audience. And who knows, maybe I will come away with ideas on how to further improve my approach to policy making about technology and privacy. Let's listen to and learn from one another.

I hope to gain new insights and learn about how to do better in the future. And maybe gain some new ideas on how to create more transparency or trust in our decisions.

Thank you all for joining, and Pieter – let's get started!