

Oxford 3 May 2017

Dear Colleagues and Organisers,

unfortunately, I shall not be able to join you for this interesting meeting. So I am especially grateful for his kind invitation to contribute a welcoming message, to share a few thoughts, and wish everyone a fruitful meeting.

As you know, the philosophy of information is going from strength to strength. Gone are the days when one had to explain what it was, and why it mattered. Today, we meet students who refer to the philosophy of information as if it were obvious that this is the topic they study and research, and why it is interesting. They are right. The number of projects, centres, and people developing new ideas in the philosophy of information keeps growing. I am not surprised. It is a popular subject. And I find this reassuring. It means that there is hope.

We are surrounded by fake news, mad politicians and irresponsible demagogues, misinformation about the future, scaremongering warnings about technological sci-fi scenarios, ignorance, obscurantism, populism, isolationism, protectionism and reactionism of all kinds. Inequality, intolerance, and anti-globalism are turning into anti-cosmopolitanism. The four pillars of our Western societies – peace, toleration, freedom, and justice – are constantly challenged by new incarnations of old fascisms and religious fundamentalisms. After the second world war, many new “beginnings” – of widespread education, of better standards of living, of more peaceful cohabitation, of safer, healthier and longer lives, of more democratic systems – made our philosophical culture complacent and disengaged. At the end of last century many “ends” – of dictatorship in several countries, of communism, of apartheid, of the cold war – made us lower our intellectual guard. We thought that the Enlightenment’s mission had been accomplished, or was soon going to be. We were wrong. And we have now been knocked down, even in some of the most liberal and democratic corners of the world. We must stand up again and resume the herculean fight against the hydra of our worst inclinations and temptations.

Clearly we need a massive dose of good philosophy to redress the situation. And we need it now. But what should philosophy today be if not a philosophy of information? Information societies are being cobbled together without a plan. There is a huge deficit of ideas, projects, and values. We are doing things without thinking first and sometime not even after. “Fail fast fail often” has become a strategy and a social policy. Its costs are immense.

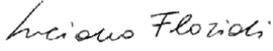
We need clear, innovative, and audacious thinking about all sorts of issues to transform the current, frustrating sickness into a healthy, growing pain. We need philosophy at its best, to provide the conceptual design required to grasp the essence of our current challenges and propose well-informed, cogent solutions. Examples abound. We need to reinstate a culture of knowledge and polite, informed dialogue. We must understand how mature information societies can improve on the Westphalian system to cope with global challenges that have outstripped any nation’s reach. We have to revisit the architecture of human rights, in order to make privacy, security, and freedom of

speech compatible with each other within the infosphere. We should update our views about human nature and dignity in light of new forms of artificial agency. Above all we need to think carefully and proactively about what human project we want to pursue. I am sure each colleague can easily expand this list.

People often complain that everything is moving too fast to be planned or regulated. But the real problem is not the pace of historical changes, but the direction they take. The faster we move into the future the more we need to control very skilfully where we are going. We owe this titanic intellectual effort to past generations, whose efforts and sufferings brought us here, and to future generations, who will judge us for the amazing opportunities we are enjoying and should not waste. We know that now is the time to take the right direction in building our information societies, their cultures, and institutions. Future generations will live within an infosphere that we are shaping today. There won't be a second chance.

This is exciting. But there is no time to waste. And we cannot indulge in irrelevant theorising. Stop scholasticism now, such self-indulgence is no longer funny, it is irresponsible, and the world cannot afford it. Our philosophy of information must be foundational, about all the informational issues that are shaping our world, our understanding of it, and our interactions with it and among ourselves. And it should be applicable, although not applied. Applied, empirical philosophy is often bad science, bad philosophy, or both. Like basic research in medicine, good philosophy is realistic, concrete, and translatable into applicable solutions for the real world. It cannot be a mere academic exercise.

I hope the meeting will be an opportunity to engage with the world and to do some good philosophy of information. I wish you very successful interactions. And I look forward to our next opportunities of interaction.


Luciano Floridi