THE CYBERSPACE CONFERENCE

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The original name of which is now known as the Cyberspace conference was at the beginning «Cyberspace: Normative Framework». It started in 2003 – that was, by the way, the year of last commercial flight of the Concorde and of the establishment of U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Originally, Cyberspace was just a small Czech event for legal theoreticians and media theorists who mostly knew each other anyway.

Until now, it is not entirely clear to me, what made the Dean of the Faculty of Law at Masaryk University to sponsor the 2004 event, so that it could host international participants. It was not any opulent sponsorship, but it gave us enough financial courage to offer a shelter and sandwich to some internationally renowned speakers – most of whom, quite surprisingly, decided to come.

Year 2004 was such a hit that the conference became almost instantly known and popular namely amongst legal academics and social scientists engaging in issues related to the development of information society. Recently, the conference host annually approx. 300 visitors from all inhabited continents out of which approx. 100 are students and the rest are scholars and researchers.

A conference is a conference, but it takes considerably more than printing the programme and making coffee to establish a true community. Probably the most important factor of the social success of Cyberspace conference was the truly academic nature of the event. It was originally put together by university scholars and researchers and it always kept its academic DNA.

It is a bit paradoxical, but the success of the conference was probably also partly caused by the fact that the administration and management of the Faculty of Law fifteen years ago was so incompetent that organising an international scientific event seemed from a technical standpoint like a science fiction. Nobody from the administrative staff had neither experience nor a tiny bit of will to undertake the organisation of anything else than Czech spoken accredited education. This all made us, young enthusiast scholars financially and morally supported by the contemporary dean, to feel like guests in restaurants of Brno of that time – i.e. as unwanted troublemakers.

In result, practically all organisational work at the conference was originally not undertaken by the faculty administration but by academics. There also emerged the tradition of student volunteers who do not only help with particular organisational tasks but who truly participate on all aspects of making of the conference. In result, the organisation and administration of the event was from the beginning very far from perfect, but it also was exceptionally enthusiastic and truthful.

Given the above metaphor of the food industry, the conference was originally forced not to feed its guests in a restaurant but to take them home. The homemade food that the conference served in its first years was far from professional or fancy, but it was made and served with passion that no restaurant can match.

The quality of the faculty administration as well as its international capabilities improved a lot in the past fifteen years (except the economic administration that, as some delegates experience annually, still gives the impression of a post-Communist restaurant). It means that regular organisational and administrative tasks around the conference can be nowadays routinely handled by professional faculty staff. Nevertheless, the conference still obstinately relies in its organisation mostly on academics and students just to keep that warmth,

passion and truthfulness in all possible aspects of the event. In result, the conference will probably never have a fancy website, professional catchy pre-event videos or bombastic campaigns on social media. However, we already learned well throughout the last 15 years that these are not what participants keep coming for.

Another important success factor of the conference is the inclusive character of the event. This was originally based on my personal experience from the start of my academic career. I always considered myself extremely lucky that it never happened to me that I would had been assessed in the international community of ICT lawyers accordingly to my age or place that I came from. Despite there always used to be in many legal disciplines clearly visible distinctions between different classes of lawyers, nationally and internationally, I never experienced anything alike among ICT lawyers. Consequently, I always strictly insisted on unexceptionally equal treatment of all conference delegates regardless of their professional seniority, origin, titles, functions or anything else.

That inclusive character of the whole event was given another dimension with the participation of world-class scholars and researchers. The conference obviously benefits from the mere presence of stars of various legal disciplines and social sciences. However, there is an added value to that in the situation when these scientific celebrities agree to be socially levelled and amalgamated with others, including students. It is then no exception to see Dan Svantesson, Michael Bogdan or Andreas Wiebe to drink coffee and fiercely discuss with enthusiast students in their twenties.

The social equality that, as I strongly believe, represents one of core values of academism as such, works also the other way around. Many senior participants come to the conference year after year not just to discuss the results of their research but also to meet old friends and to find new ones. There are also probably only very few things more satisfying for scholars than seeing the enthusiasm, dedication and progress of their followers. People who originally participated at the conference as students then regularly keep returning to the event as speakers and that just makes those senior academics who originally motivated their professional orientation mostly happy.

That all is possible also thanks to a combination of factors making the venue quite attractive and accessible. The conference never moved away from Brno, which is a middle-sized university town located between Prague and Vienna. Brno is the judicial capital of the Czech Republic and there are numerous ICT research and development investments in the area, which, together with the presence of universities, makes it also the technology centre of the country. The location allows for very convenient transport and, given its history and placement, it also provides for a number of amusement options. The combination of different attractions actually made Brno one of the fifty places that readers of the New York Times got recommended to visit last year. Up to that, Brno is overall cheap to travel to – and it is still quite impossible to find there a pub or a restaurant (even a fancy one) where a beer would be over two Euros.

There is a number of other factors that, as I believe, contributed to the establishment of the Cyberspace conference as a true community. One of special features of the conference is that the focus is truly multidisciplinary. There is not just law or jurisprudence, but also other humanities and social sciences such as psychology, sociology, philosophy or theory of religion. Substantial presence of these disciplines (almost 50% of the programme) provides, together will the overall atmosphere of the event, for endless opportunities for participants to get inspiration and feedback from strange and unusual perspectives.

As to the overall academic value of the event, I think it is also quite important that there are two well-established peer-reviewed journals associated with the conference. The Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology accepts articles and comments in law and the Cyberpsychology takes papers in social sciences. Both journals are open-access and listed in international databases, so those willing to write apart from speaking are given a good opportunity to make their contributions in permanently accessible solid form (it is even more solid with the MUJLT, because it still keeps a traditional printed form besides being published on-line).