

Laudatio Sir Tim Berners-Lee

Sir Timothy Berners-Lee, dear Tim, I feel deeply privileged and honoured to award you this honorary doctorate degree on behalf of VU University Amsterdam. I cannot think of another person in Computer Science who deserves it more than you. This year we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Web, or perhaps we should say, the 20th anniversary of your conception of the Web, while you were working at CERN in Geneva. For many of us, the Web has become such an integral part of our daily life that we hardly realize anymore that it was the brainchild of one person. You based the Web on a combination of three simple technologies: the mark-up language HTML, the notion of a URL and the HTTP protocol. These once obscure technical terms are now an elementary part of everybody's vocabulary.

But your work didn't stop with this astounding technical contribution to humanity, far from it. During the nineties you set up the World-Wide Web Consortium, a non-profit organization under the ambitious motto "Bringing the Web to its full potential". With you as director, W3C (as the Consortium is commonly known) has fulfilled this ambitious promise and has continued to lead the way in key Web developments. Open access, in the true sense of the term "open", is the spearhead here. I will name just three examples of the fruits of the W3C tree. Firstly, the development of XML paved the way for the exchange of data in a standard format. Without it, we would still be the defenceless victims of the proprietary formats of large software vendors. Secondly, W3C defined guidelines for keeping the Web accessible for people with disabilities; these guidelines have become, or are in the process of becoming, law in countries all over the globe. Thirdly, you initiated work on the Semantic Web, a web of data and machines, which is now opening up new avenues for accessing information and knowledge.

In the past few years you also started two important new initiatives. You are actively promoting Web Science as a novel area of research. Web Science should be viewed as a discipline that studies the Web as a phenomenon, focusing particularly on the interplay between Web technology and its effect on human behaviour at personal, organizational, and societal level. Web Science will soon be a pervading theme in academic research and education. I am happy to say that, starting from next year, the Network Institute of this university will offer a minor in Web Science for a broad range of students from many disciplines.

The second initiative is the World-Wide Web Foundation, which promotes wide-scale deployment of the Web in less privileged areas of the world. Those of you who attended this morning's symposium on the "Web for Social Development" will have seen how this initiative is shaping up as a powerful medium for cooperation and sharing with developing countries. Food aid is, of course, essential, but in the long run, universal access to information and knowledge might prove even more

important as a support mechanism. We would like to offer you our activities in this area, as presented this morning, as a small token of our appreciation for your work and as an accompaniment to this doctorate.

Let me conclude with a few personal words. In the past seven years serving as chair of a number of W3C Working Groups has been one of the most gratifying experiences of my life. I deeply admire the spirit in which you lead this endeavour; a spirit that still pervades the work in the open Web community. The spirit of open discussion which stimulates continuous development, without any prejudice towards social status or cultural background,. At the meetings you take the input of an overzealous new kid on the block as seriously as that of an established name. This openness of mind is, in my view, the key to your success. We continue to be grateful for these lessons. They make the world a better place. Thank you, Doctor Tim.

