

## Does the Internet help to sustain a free and open society?

A free and an open society can only be based on a high level of transparency of the actions of its members. Dangers that transparency helps to avoid are such social phenomena as corruption, nepotism and advancement based on, for example, race, religion, gender or a membership of some club. Transparency is tied with the level of trust in society. Transparency helps to increase trust but trust also limits the level of transparency that can be achieved. Progress in the level of trust and transparency are closely linked. They come hand in hand: transparency is the sail and trust is the hull.

It would seem that the more access to information is at the hands of the people using the Internet the more transparency there is and that, given some time, the society will become more open and the level of trust will increase. At least it seems that in the recent uprisings in the Arab countries Social media and the Internet have played into the hands of democracy.

There are, however, some traits of human behavior that, when linked with the Internet, cause worry. Let us list some them. (1) The Internet makes it easy to distribute views irrespective whether they are based on knowledge, prejudice or self-interested lies. (2) The Internet can be used for group forming based on any, even crazy, ideas, (3) Internet lets a qualified sender spoof his/her addresses and any names and identities, so it does not support accountability for one's actions. (4) The main business model of major players such as Google, and even more so Facebook, is based on advertising and people are trading their privacy in order to use the provider's "free" services. To be successful, these companies must collect as much information about the users as they can and exploit that in imaginative ways. This may be fine so far as everything works as planned. But what if the information gets into the hands of some player that the user never intended? And finally, (5) many of us like to benefit on the expense of others and fool ourselves into believing that there is a "free lunch". Unfortunately, the Internet seems to breed this mentality because earning money directly from information is inherently hard and because the technology tries to avoid accountability.

An example of dangers that are increased due to fast communications is the role of alarmist sentiments that seem to shake the financial markets every so often. One wonders whether real knowledge or even common sense is being used on the financial markets or whether it is all about fear and greed.

On financial markets, many players, including TV-, radio- and printed media journalists, many investors, middlemen who earn from the volume of transactions and even consumers are the least interested in stability because nobody wants to die of boredom or because one can make money both on growing markets as well as falling markets but not if everything is stable. Not to mention that there is nothing newsworthy unless there is either a crisis, a war or a boom market. Now, what happens when a very powerful tool for information distribution such as the Internet appears: distribution of rumors that in the past have led to banks going bankrupt becomes easier, blowing news out of proportion or initiating "news" without checking facts happen too often, because every medium is up to the eyeballs in the struggle to get a share of the advertising money. An example is the news that was initially reported claiming falsely that Muslims were behind the recent bombs and mass murder in Norway.

Like with other great innovations we learn to use them and understand the consequences of the use only gradually. Internet goes into the same category by its impact on society as electricity, banking or automobiles. Now we have enough experience of the Internet era to worry about the following:

- (1) Does the speed of communication increase instability in financial markets and the economy at large by feeding low quality information into the markets and contributing to breeding greed?
- (2) Does this powerful tool need a corresponding increase in morality, education and understanding of the consequences of one's actions?
- (3) What countermeasures (if any) are feasible in order to mitigate the adverse effects of fast information and disinformation distribution?

We, network researchers, together with techno-economists, lawyers and social scientists have been trying to understand the question of Identity in the Internet so that it could be used as a starting point for better accountability for one's actions in the Internet. This, I believe, to be a timely topic that calls for broader discussion in society. How can we build a technology that does not hurt privacy even under dictatorships and repressive regimes while supporting ethical behavior through accountability?