

SUSAN LIAUTAUD

Founder and Managing Director, Susan Liautaud & Associates Limited

Steven ERLANGER

Anyway, we are now going to move to Susan Liautaud, who does lots of things, but has a real specialty in ethics and in this Internet age, particularly with the scandals swarming around and the way the media is being used for them, I think she has quite a lot to say. Susan?

Susan LIAUTAUD

Thank you, Steven, and thanks and congratulations to Thierry. It is an honour to be here. What I would like to try to do is to focus on a couple of themes that I think undergird this link between technology and what we might call truth and indeed trust under siege, and in particular, I would like to look at this intertwining of technology, power and truth and see what it yields in terms of what we should do. Because there is a lot of explaining and complaining, where at the end of the day, we need to take action, and I would suggest that we need to rethink the way we are making decisions in this technologically laden world.

To start with, power today, as we have been hearing throughout the day, is scattered. We heard it from the President of the ICRC and we heard it from Ambassador Eizenstat. Power is scattered to people like the WannaCry hackers or like the extremist Buddhist monk in Myanmar who disregarded the government's prohibition on his preaching and just took it to Facebook with his verbal abuse of the Rohingyas and some horrific photographs. The problem with the scattering of power is that there is no corresponding assumption of ethical responsibility for the deployment of the power and in fact, we do not really even know who has the power.

The second power dynamic is a concentration of power in the technology companies. All the time in the news, we hear about the so-called big five, the Amazons and Googles and Facebooks, but in fact, it goes much further and not just to the Ubers of the world, but all the way down the chain to the start-ups. The fundamental responsibility issue here is that, and there are exceptions, they typically do not think ethics first and then put their technology out there. In fact, I would suggest that many of them have a proactive strategy of just doing and waiting until they have a head-on collision with the regulator or consumers who will stop them. The question here is how do we rebalance the allocation of responsibility? The starting point for me at least at this point is to say that this tagline that they are only a platform is simply no longer acceptable. We cannot have online sex trafficking, recruiting of terrorists and all manner of wrongdoing and have these companies saying that they are just a neutral platform. On the other hand, we cannot have regulators targeting and quashing innovation in ways that can also be negative for society.

Now, the final point about power and technology is that technology has disempowered state institutions. Starting with the law, we see that legal systems lag very far behind technology, which is constantly changing and at an increasingly fast pace, and the law simply cannot keep up. We see that legal systems are very ill-equipped to deal with the cross-border impact of technology, and understandably legislators just do not understand the technology. Similarly, state institutions are going to be falling short with respect to power. There are many complicated examples. I will stick to one, which is cyberwarfare. I do not know of many states that could run a cyberwar without recourse to the private sector or indeed individuals. Technology has totally disrupted this power dynamic and the first part of the 'What we do' question is that we need to make decisions in this new reality and not think about a balance of power that is outdated, even a year or two outdated.

Now, regarding truth, technology has also catalysed this epidemic of compromised truth, so fake news is a major example, but there are other examples out there. There is a Chinese app called Meitu that allows one to take away a few wrinkles and take away a few pounds in a matter of seconds and then put a photo on a dating app. There are all manner of contagion, but in order to do the right thing, in order to make good decisions, we must insist on truth, the kind of scientifically verifiable or social science research-based truth. To Steven's earlier point, I had the privilege of

interviewing Salman Rushdie a couple of months ago and he said, 'You know, it is not because you say the world is round that it is round. And the world does not need you to believe that it is round for it to be so', and I think we all again need to be staunchly committed to truth.

More generally, when we put all of these dynamics together, the power and the contagious nature of compromised truth driven by technology, we have to ask ourselves, 'What else about our decision-making needs to shift?' I would suggest a couple of things. One is that we need to broaden the conversation. It cannot be that the innovators and those who control the innovations, be they large corporations or holders of super-majority voting shares in Silicon Valley, are the deciders on behalf of society about when and how innovation is unleashed on society. We need a much broader conversation. I have a personal challenge of trying to figure out how to do this, but it needs to involve academic institutions and think-tanks, corporates and non-profits and governments of all kinds and above all, it needs to go beyond the US and Western Europe because all of the impacts of technology are different around the world, but they are certainly global and at the moment, the only sort of checks and balances are institutions like the European Commission and so on.

The other thing we need to do with our decision-making in my view is to look at it through three lenses, all focused on humanity. One is the individual, and incidentally, everything I am saying applies across any kind of technology, whether it is Bitcoin or civilian space travel or gene editing or social media. But if we take the example of gene editing, a patient with Huntington's disease wants it now and understandably, but at the same time, if we're looking at it through the societal lens, we are very worried about all the risks of what the experts say is a scissor simple technique. What happens if we lose control of it? If we look at humanity writ large, we are very concerned about potentially permanently altering the human germline. All of these questions though have potential implications for individuals and for society and for humanity writ large.

Then finally, we need to look at this very daunting and complex reality that we have with this complicated distribution of power, lack of understanding about where it is and who is responsible and we need to avoid taking refuge in the binary. We seem to be suffering from an epidemic of binary decision-making. As a London resident, I will call out Brexit as the crowning example of a disastrous decision, the only result of which could have been divisiveness and waste, but there are others. A physical example is President Trump's wall: one side or the other? We have Transport for London: Uber, in or out? I think we should be asking not so much yes or no with these technologies that have both positive and negative impacts, but we should be asking when and under what circumstances. How can we maximise the positive benefits and minimise the risk? I think I will stop there.

Steven ERLANGER

Susan, thank you very much. One thing I just wanted to ask you, what always troubles me is at least under American laws, as I understand it, things like Facebook are not really publishers. They do not have the obligations of publishers. They are kind of highways on which all kinds of garbage can pass and they say, 'We have no responsibility for what travels on our road. We are just the road'. Right? Yet the minute you begin to talk about regulation, certainly in Western democracies, you begin to have a slightly chilling effect. Who regulates what and where does freedom of speech end? We will come back to this, but I am just curious to ask you how much is this becoming a restriction on one's sense of the freedom of the Internet? I mean have we had the party and now we are worried about the hangover or what?

Susan LIAUTAUD

I think it is a great question. First of all, I should say that all of these companies have a lot of margin for proactive ethical decision-making before we ever get to infringement of free speech. All of this will have to be about effective ethical decision-making above and beyond the law because as I said, the law will never catch up and we would not want it to because the law would undoubtedly cross certain lines.

I should say I am very pro-innovation. I am very pro-business. I am very pro-free speech and I do not think ethical decision-making tramples on any of that. Even in the US and in the UK, but in particular in the US, even the First Amendment does not protect some of the speech that you and I are talking about. It does not protect inciting murder. It does not protect certain kinds of hate speech. It certainly does not protect child pornography and online sex trafficking.



Steven ERLANGER

As the Supreme Court once said, free speech does not include shouting 'Fire' in a crowded theatre.

Susan LIAUTAUD

Right.