

On the technology frontiers

As the digital revolution sweeps on we will face more and more dilemmas about personal freedom versus personal empowerment.

In its early days the internet was largely unregulated, allowing a profusion of new communications, spawning an army of citizen journalists with their own take on events and permitted advice on any topic including the assistance of crime.

As the internet grew so governments understandably intervened to stop extreme abuses. The internet should not be a school for terrorists, an on line academy for bomb makers or a means of money laundering large sums from the proceeds of crime.

Some also asked that the internet be subject to the same laws of libel and slander as the regular media. Many asked for protection from false allegations and from messages of hatred. This has opened up a debate about the duties of internet providers, the extent to which censorship is needed and justified, and the role of the internet in causing harm as well as its manifold ways of doing good.

There are contributors to this site who are deeply suspicious of how the state behaves and how it might come to use new digital controls for its own ends. Would the evolution of a cashless economy mean not merely full visibility of all transactions by the state but state controls and limitations on those same transactions? At what point does a better convenience for users become an unwarranted intrusion into privacy? Should we all expect in the emerging world that all our actions, words, purchases are fully available for public scrutiny, or do there remain legitimate reasons for people to be able to keep to themselves what they lawfully do?

Authoritarian societies can deploy digital communications, cashless money, transaction reporting to control their people. They could decline to sell a train ticket to a protest location. They could decline credit to people who join the political opposition. They could intercept on line conversations between friends wishing to share annoyance at government activities.

The challenge for the free West to keep its freedoms is to get the right balance between tackling serious crime conducted in whole or part through digital activities, whilst allowing the usual privacies of people's spending habits, criticisms of government and the rest that constitute a free society.

There is the additional challenge that as the giant corporations of the current digital era emerge with all their power, the western system should allow strong competition and challenge to them. There is a danger in codifying how they behave and laying down in law too much of how their business has to be conducted. These can become barriers to innovation by smaller companies, and can impose expensive barriers to entry to the business.

As we leave the EU the UK should revisit its laws and regulations governing the digital world to strike a good balance between keeping us safe and allowing plenty of competition.