

DINNER/DISCUSSION SUMMARY

The impact of the use of social media on society and democracy

Held at The Royal Society on 11th July, 2012

The Foundation is grateful for the support for this meeting
from the Technology Strategy Board.

- Chair:** **The Earl of Selborne GBE FRS**
Chairman, The Foundation for Science and Technology
- Speakers:** **Dr Mike Lynch OBE FREng**
Founder, Autonomy Corporation Plc.
Dr Julian Huppert MP
MP for Cambridge
Kathryn Corrick
Digital Media Consultant, KathrynCorrick
- Panellist:** **Candace Kuss**
Director of Planning and Interactive Strategy,
Hill+Knowlton Strategies

DR MIKE LYNCH saw social media as a quintessentially disruptive phenomenon, enabled by layers of new technology, and one that had come into its own with the proliferation of mobile devices. Usage was already huge and growing very rapidly. To understand how this was changing the way many things happen, it was necessary to look at the near-total immersion of the 5 to 25 age group in social media and the high proportion of their time spent on social media such as Facebook and Twitter rather than reading linear print in newspapers, magazines and books, or was spent on visual media such as YouTube rather than watching traditional TV. Much of their constant inter-communication on social media services might seem banal and quotidian, but it was enabling friends to share experiences, remaining present without physical proximity, a remarkable innovation in human behaviour. It was also creating a powerful distinctive culture and common language incomprehensible to the (usually older) non-wired.

Smart companies were already recognising the potential of social media and its shared references for reaching out to this demographic (such as the Ritz cracker advertisement on buses "the wheels on the bus go nom, nom, nom").

Notable was the way that social media provided a 'one-to-many' communications channel, different from the typical 'one-to-one' conversations of the telephone era. As the Facebook generation grew up they would carry this culture with them. It was therefore important for democracy that social media

be embraced by politicians to listen, to talk and to give feedback on views expressed.

Continuing, Mike Lynch described how by creating a virtual public space social media posed problems for traditional legal constructs. For example, remedies for offences such as libel could be problematic due to the anonymity of postings on the internet and the use of proxy servers overseas, and the volume of re-tweeting of defamatory comments. Regulation on the lines of that for financial services or pharmaceutical industries was unlikely to work due to the huge volumes of potential cases to be monitored and policed.

One effect of social media would be felt in terms of protest and criminal activity with the ability of individuals without ever meeting to coordinate actions, at the near-real time speed of the internet. This phenomenon had already been demonstrated in the Arab Spring (a good thing) as well as in England in August 2011 (a bad thing). That illustrated the two sides of the social media revolution. It brought major social, economic and democratic opportunities, including the ability to communicate better with the electorate, to educate and to present the facts. At the same time, social media use also carried dangers from the ill-intentioned which would have to be managed. Government had to have both aspects in mind when devising policy.

Concluding, Mike Lynch expressed concerns that as the technology of social media intelligence and surveillance become cheap and readily available it will give non-State groups and movements, conventional media and business corporations power over us

through their ability to see into our lives and identify and track our movements and associations. Neither government nor the individual in society could function effectively without private space. Regulating the many examples of such 'little brother' surveillance would be much harder than keeping in check the State as 'big brother' through judicial and Parliamentary oversight.

DR JULIAN HUPPERT drew attention to the revolutionary changes that social networks and digital communications were bringing to how people can come together to communicate as a group, breaking down the restrictions of having to be in the same place for a forum of collective discussion or being limited in number of participants by the constraints of the telegraph or telephone or limited by the speed of communication of physical transport of the printed word. Information, ideas, opinions - and prejudices - were easily shared. We should recognise that not all social media had the same characteristics in that respect.

Facebook was based on the concept of the friendship group with many-to-many cross-communication. Twitter was essentially a one-to-many medium for broadcasting experiences and views in a highly abbreviated way. The latter carried the evident danger of instant comment and oversimplification. Most Tweeters (including most politicians who used the medium) were frankly more interested in the ability to transmit information to their Twitter followers than to digest the responses their views evoked. Julian Huppert drew on his own experience as an early adopter (the first MP) to use Twitter to illustrate this point. So far, the private sector (such as airlines and rail companies) were making more use of the medium than government.

The police too had to learn from the experience of the disturbances in August 2011, to be able to respond to requests from the public, to provide accurate information and rebut rumours and to anticipate the activities of rioters who were using social media to organise. It was notable how social media had been successfully used to mobilise the public to help clear up after the riots.

His experience was that democracy would certainly be helped by the way social media enabled easier contact with the constituency MP, and would be a more informal means of contact than the traditional constituents' letters. The medium could be effective in communicating with previously hard to reach groups, but equally it could inadvertently cut out the non-IT literate including many in the present older generation. The role of lobby journalists had changed since they no longer were the almost exclusive means of access to news about politics,

applying an unwritten set of rules for example about attribution of exclusives. Local issues and events would certainly be brought to an MP's attention far faster than in the past, and his experience was that could lead to productive sustained two-way exchanges with constituents.

The citizen journalist had arrived and the old restraints on revelations about private lives, for example, had gone. Cases had already arisen with individual police and military personnel and civil servants using social media to comment on their daily activities in ways that blurred their private freedom of expression and their public role (google 'puffles the dragon fairy' for an example).

Guidance for public servants was needed. The global nature of social media did provide new opportunities for abuses to be highlighted and also for pressure groups to form to counter them. The 'Occupy' movement, for example, had swiftly moved across the Atlantic. The 38degrees website had so far mobilised more than six million people to petition the government and MPs over issues ranging from surveillance to the NHS.

Continuing, Julian Huppert identified the value for political parties and groups of the way that re-tweeting provided an automatic filter for messaging to special interest groups without the need for expensive efforts to maintain distribution lists. Those with an interest in receiving a message would be likely to forward it to others they knew who shared the interest and so on down a branching network. He welcomed the fact that the next UK General Election would be the first in which social media would play an important part, something that had already been experienced in the US.

That said, he regretted that the prevalence of instant comment found on social media, and tweeted and re-tweeted stories with no substance, could easily create a lasting impression in the public consciousness that eventual rebuttal would not dispel. A recent example was the persistence of the impression that had quickly been created in the public mind of the evils of the so-called 'granny tax' based on initial reporting. The medium carried an unrealisable expectation of instant response, with the danger of being sucked into ill-considered instant comment. And 'trolls' were active on Twitter as elsewhere on the internet and their unwanted attentions had to be disregarded. Whether we had the right to be anonymous on the Internet was an interesting but unanswered question. A natural tendency for over-regulation by the State had to be resisted.

KATHRYN CORRICK illustrated her remarks with a practical demonstration of the power of social media

by showing how some members of the audience had already used their mobile phones to tweet their opinions on Mike Lynch's opening talk, thus connecting those present at the FST meeting with a potentially global audience in near-real time. No permissions were needed to communicate in this new world.

Citing Peter Kafka, that one upside of the web is that everyone has a printing press but one downside is that everyone has a printing press, she drew attention to the growth in ownership of mobile devices, such as cameras and tablets with the ability to capture and transmit video as well as pictures, producing a deluge of data with the problem of too much rather than too little information. This effect would increase as more services moved onto the cloud. The communications speed was near-real time, agreeing with Terry Pratchett's remark that 'a lie can be round the world before the truth has got its trousers on'. The cost of recording and storing all this data had steadily fallen, in line with rise in processing power as predicted by Moore's law.

Communications were now (with only a few exceptions in repressive States) not limited by national borders and the use of proxy servers was helping to circumvent those restrictions some governments still tried to impose on what their populations were allowed to know. Nevertheless, it was not the case that near-universal access brought a similar level of comprehension. A straw poll of those present revealed very few who were accessing information in languages other than English and French, although she accepted the comment that software such as Google Chrome could provide automated rough translations of text accessed on the web.

Developing this argument, Kathryn Corrick pointed to the increasing dependence of public and private sectors on a few big ICT and software companies such as Google, Amazon, Apple and Facebook. Their oligarchic market position provided these companies with great power to restrict, exclude, censor or shut down services, without corresponding public accountability.

Kathryn Corrick suggested nevertheless that behind the newness of the technology some human certainties had not changed. We too readily disregarded our own history of previous technological changes that had created new patterns of human communication. The drivers of social upheavals were often the essentials of economic life and the divide between rich and poor, also issues for today in which a better understanding of the past would help. Basic human judgment was still needed to assess what was really relevant and what merely

noise in the system. The validation of machine results, for example from analysing huge data sets, still required human comprehension and common sense. Even more fundamentally, human emotions had not changed with the desire to be loved, to keep in touch, to be secure and protected, to live and have fun.

Another fundamental characteristic of the human animal to be seen today through social media use was the desire to be part of something bigger and to be a social being and for many a desire to change the world mostly for the better, but recognising that the desire for power and for some for absolute power would still exert an attraction through control of social media today as through other ways in the past.

Concluding, Kathryn Corrick suggested that in the UK many institutions, Parliament, the Banks, the police, the media, had all lost moral authority. The public needed to understand a new narrative of what these institutions represented in the digital world. The story was more about the struggle between libertarian and authoritarian tendencies than those of the traditional Left and Right. New media provided the opportunity for a more inclusive politics. The activities of hackers and hacktivists had to be understood in terms of their wish to change the world from their point of view, especially the original utopian vision of the Internet as a space where everyone would have the freedom to be what they wanted to be. Economic 'capital' in this world was now human; intellectual 'property' was not regarded as being in single ownership of corporations. Marx needed re-evaluating. Our use of technologies such as social media was a reflection of our humanity and our society, so we should be asking ourselves as we examined social media, what sort of society do we want to see?

CANDACE KUSS commented from her marketing background with big companies and leading brands. Social media use was having a major impact on brand and reputation management, and even on corporate organisation. Digital communication by customers broke down barriers between customer service, marketing, public communications, and sales. Complaints about quality or service were now instantly in the public domain, as was the company response. New corporate job roles of community managers were being created.

In discussion that followed the speakers, several participants drew attention to the need to educate the public on how best to manage the risks of the new technology. It was essential to set appropriate privacy settings and to teach users to check that their financial and other sensitive transactions were being conducted via an https// encrypted site. It was too easy for parody accounts to be set up to mimic real sites, or

personation by criminals who were effectively untraceable.

Individuals should claim their own digital footprint, and businesses should ensure that they claimed naming rights over domains that might be associated with their brand. The disruptive nature of digital technologies was highlighted. The perfect recall of machines, let alone the deliberate recording by some enthusiasts of all of their life experience, would pose problems for all of us. Our life is based on the acceptance of deliberate imperfection in memory, allowing compromises in essential human activities from peace negotiations to personal relationships to politics.

The speed of machine computation and communication far outstripped the speed of human thought. We needed a right to forget, but digitised information from emails to Facebook pages would always be stored somewhere. Tagging of us by others in their visual, contacts and other records also meant that we no longer had meaningful control over our personal data. Understanding big data sets using computers was a fast developing field. Crowd sourcing to analyse large data sets was already being used in some fields but carried dangers in cases where it mattered that respondents had a reasonable knowledge of the subject. Complex issues needed careful analysis based on evidence and experience not instant polling.

Further discussion also brought out the empowering advantages of the new technologies. In emergencies social media provided an unparalleled means for the public and the authorities to be in contact, as had been seen in relief efforts in Japan and in Haiti. Social media could be used for detecting the early signs of public health problems, and for personal medical monitoring. Care would nevertheless be needed in social media analysis where responses could not easily be weighted for the quality of data or inadvertent bias in sampling.

It was suggested that some of the problems of a growing elderly population could be mitigated by encouraging social media use, something that would be natural when the current younger generation aged. There might be less reliance on the printed word, and more on visual representations, including virtual reality and layered reality. It was pointed out that for much of human history the primary means of communication had been by visual image from cave paintings to the renaissance.

In concluding discussion, there was general agreement that the social media revolution would change much around our future social and economic interactions and the tempo of life in ways of which

we were only now dimly aware. But human activity would go on being driven by the same basic needs and desires, with relationships based on reputation and trust. It was important that a new model of leadership developed that provided stable values, and explained why rather than dictating how people should behave in society, as a counterpart to the tendency for popular will as revealed by social media to be increasingly liquid.

Sir David Omand GCB

Useful web links:

Autonomy
www.autonomy.com

British Computer Society
www.bcs.org

"A balance between security and privacy online must be struck..." by Sir David Omand, Jamie Bartlett, Carl Miller, #INTELLIGENCE, Demos Report
www.demos.co.uk/files/Intelligence-web.pdf

Dr Julian Huppert MP
www.julianhuppert.org.uk

Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council
www.epsrc.ac.uk

The Foundation for Science and Technology
www.foundation.org.uk

Hill+Knowlton Strategies
www.hillandknowlton.co.uk

KathrynCorrick
www.kathryncorrick.co.uk

New York University study of influence on the Web
<http://www.sciencemag.org/content/early/2012/06/20/science.1215842>

Research Councils UK
www.rcuk.ac.uk

The Royal Society
www.royalsociety.org

Technology Strategy Board
www.innovateuk.org

University of Southampton - research on Web Science; a systems level view of the Web
<http://dtc.webscience.ecs.soton.ac.uk/>

Ushahidi - software and use of social media that has been used in humanitarian relief
<http://ushahidi.com>

University of Southampton – investigation of the "dark Web"
<http://eprints.soton.ac.uk/337076>

Wellesley College – analysis of how an election result may have been changed by Twitter
www.wellesley.edu/PublicAffairs/Releases/2010/050310.html

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