

TECHNOLOGY, ESPECIALLY THE communications technology of the internet, has improved our lives enormously. But, around the world, we have seen an increase in its misuse. In 2021, the search will be on for ways to restore public trust in technology and (re)establish it as a force for good in the social contract between government and society.

Governments in a number of states are already using the internet to spread misinformation and suppress dissent. There have been many examples of technology failing to live up to our expectations as a way of managing Covid-19. We've seen this play out as we try to mitigate the effects of the pandemic too – such as the failure of the algorithm used to assign A Level grades in the UK in August 2020. The algorithm performed as it was designed to, but failures in the design and issues with data led to chaos and confusion for students, many of whom will remember this as one of their most formative experiences of technology.

In 2021 we will see increasing demand for a new kind of social contract, one which recognises the challenges and benefits that technology of all kinds brings to our daily lives, and ensures that governments must act responsibly when it comes to dealing with technology.

This move towards reining in governmental use of technology will be the result of public pressure. As the Cambridge Analytica scandals of 2018 and the growing concern over the UK's contact-tracing app show, people have become far more sceptical of what the government says it's doing with their data, especially during the pandemic. In April 2020, The Ada Lovelace Institute, which I chair, concluded that “effective deployment of technology to support the transition

from the crisis will be contingent on public trust and confidence.”

Governments will have to take steps to convince their citizens that they are worthy of their trust. To do this in the context of the pandemic, it will be essential that a publicly accountable body is set up to represent the rights of citizens in government use of data around Covid-19, particularly if there is the risk that these interventions develop in ways that reinforce the systemic inequalities that disproportionately impact the most vulnerable. Their oversight should include the technology governments are launching to deal with Covid-19, with legislation ensuring that these technological interventions, such as so-called immunity passports, are thoroughly vetted and are swiftly decommissioned when the need for them has passed.

There is a huge opportunity for a virtuous circle here. Greater trust of how governments use our data will lead to citizens being happier about handing over their data to governments in the first place. In turn, this will give us better data to feed into the algorithms we use to manage the crisis. In 2021, we will use the lessons we have learned through the pandemic to understand the complex and myriad ways in which technology is integral to every aspect of our lives and start to integrate it into the foundations of our society.

We will integrate technology into the social contract between government and society

Building trust in how data is used will prepare us for the next crisis

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