



RTT TECHNOLOGY TOPIC
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**Intelligent networks and the
solace of silence**

The news this month is rightly dominated by memories of 9/11 on the tenth anniversary of the attack on the twin towers. As with Remembrance Sunday the loss of friends and relatives of all faiths and nationalities is marked by silence.

Mobile communications has changed the way we respond to these life changing events and of course to the way we record them. Visual images have the power to shock and inspire, sound has the power to move us emotionally but only silence gives us the space that we need to remember the past in a fitting and effective way.

And the point about an anniversary is that it should give us a sense of perspective and remind us that some events overwhelm all others in terms of their historical importance.

Much debate has ensued as to the role of mobile communications in preventing future attacks for example as a mechanism for gathering intelligence on people that are suspected of terrorist intent, the function of public protection and of course the role that the networks play in disaster relief in the aftermath of terrorist attacks or natural disasters. Mobile communications have we are told enabled the Arab Spring but conversely are increasingly used to coordinate civil unrest, for example in the summer riots in the UK.

This is tricky territory, freedom fighters are terrorists in some people's eyes and vice versa. Not all looters and rioters are criminals though in practice 75% of those apprehended and processed through the UK courts apparently had previous criminal convictions though this may be the result of some active pre selection.

These are all reasons why the telecommunications industry has always been and will always be subject to political scrutiny.

For the industry and politicians and regulators with an interest in the industry the question is whether the present rapid growth of mobile broadband connectivity increases or decreases the need for scrutiny and what form and shape that scrutiny should take.

There is also an issue of scale. If the mobile broadband industry is genuinely going to be handling 150 exabytes of data per year by 2015 which on the basis of present trends it will and if we consider that last year the figure was closer to three exabytes then the sheer cost of processing useful intelligence will be astronomic. The bigger the haystack the easier it is to hide.

The counter argument is that meta descriptors, geo tagging and search algorithms together make the task possible, but possible is not the same as economic or the basis of political justification.

The forensic analysis of mobile phone conversations has of course led to a number of high profile arrests and convictions and therefore could be argued as being a good thing.

However someone has to pay for this and it will be generally be us as customers so we are paying for people to spy on us. Of course the public good argument may outweigh privacy concerns but again there is a fine line to be drawn. Recent controversy over unauthorised phone hacking in the UK shows that private organisations are capable of doing things which cannot be justified on a rational public interest basis and it can be assumed that governments are not immune to crossing this dividing line between public and not so public scrutiny.

But the public interest issue is significantly broader. Broadcasting has been regulated since the 1920's in the UK with the formation of the BBC and from the early thirties in the US with the setting up of the FCC. The reasons for regulations may initially be technical. For instance in the US radio broadcasters had a

tendency in the late 1920's just to increase transmit power to the point where no one could receive very much. The need for this technical regulation still exists today and is the basis on which spectral value can be assessed whether for the purpose of broadcasting or mobile broadband communication. Technology standards fulfil a similar role ensuring that networks and user equipment are compatible and as far as possible inter operable.

The oversight of content developed in parallel with particular controls being applied during the Second World War. The BBC governance structure is often held up as an exemplar of appropriate balance between editorial independence and political interest but the record is not unblemished. Empire radio broadcasting after the Second World War for example can be argued to have become significantly out of touch with reality. The Suez crisis in 1958 was at least partly caused by this inability to recognise and respond to changing political expectations in countries where legitimate British interest and involvement was increasingly open to question.

But of course in broadcasting, monitoring and intervention is relatively straightforward and ends up with a phone call to the Director General of the BBC and a bit of a chat. Controlling content in mobile broadband involves monitoring five billion people, a rather different proposition. Chris Patten the Chairman of the BBC Trust is an ex politician, served as the last governor of Hong Kong and managed the handover process to China so the coupling of political experience and broadcasting policy remains close. At least those in charge of British Broadcasting now realise that the days of the British Empire are long gone.

This brings us back to our starting point. Terrible events of which 9/11 is a very significant example change public opinion and political opinion tends to change in parallel at least in democracies where governments need to be re elected and need to be seen to be responding to external threats to public safety and security.

This creates a pendulum shift effect where public interest takes precedence for often legitimate reasons but the consequence is usually an erosion of private liberty. The ends do not always justify the means.

Telecommunications networks are not intelligence networks or rather intelligence gathering is not and should not be their primary purpose. The primary purpose of a telecommunications network should be to improve economic and social efficiency which in turn should deliver more political stability, a virtuous circle.

Intelligent networks are therefore networks used intelligently to deliver a common good.

And just sometimes it is good to at least pretend they don't exist.

In 1833 Thomas Carlyle published a serial work, Sartor Resartus, The Tailor Retailored. This was part satire part philosophy based on the life and thoughts of an imaginary German philosopher Diogenus Teufelsdröckh ('god born devil dung' in English).

The power of silence has been recognised since biblical times but Carlyle gets Diogenus to expand on the topic

"Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves together; that at length they may emerge, full-formed and majestic, into the daylight of Life, which they are thenceforth to rule. Not William the Silent only, but all the considerable men I have known, and the most undiplomatic and unstrategic of these, forbore to babble of what they were creating and projecting. Nay, in thy own mean perplexities, do thou thyself but hold thy tongue for one day: on the morrow, how much clearer are thy purposes and duties; what wreck and rubbish have those mute workmen within thee swept away, when intrusive noises were shut out! Speech is too often not, as the Frenchman defined it, the art of concealing Thought; but of quite stifling and suspending Thought, so that there is none to conceal. Speech too is great, but not the greatest. As the Swiss Inscription says: Sprechen ist silbern, Schweigen ist golden (Speech is silvern, Silence is golden); or as I might rather express it: Speech is of Time, Silence is of Eternity."

Just occasionally satire yields both common sense and a certain profoundness. Silence can be a powerful source of solace. Silence also allows us to view the future with a measure of detachment and sense of historical perspective. It might be good to turn that phone off on Sunday.

Editors note – this piece replaced an article on smart phones which quite frankly seemed rather irrelevant and inappropriate but will appear next month regardless.

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