



## **POLICING THE INTERNET: ALIGNING THE INTERNET WITH THE REAL WORLD**

### **MV Conversations with António de Macedo Vitorino**

**The Internet is open to anyone with a mobile phone hiding behind an Internet 'identity', and this is where the real work is for Governments and Regulators to step in to protect our communities.**

Recent and past atrocities have thrust the Internet and social media into the spotlight. From cyberbullying, slander and trolling to live streaming terror, the worldwide web is becoming ever more entangled.

While there is legislation in place to punish those held accountable, one of the main problems facing our Governments is the anonymity of those actually responsible, says António Macedo de Vitorino. "The priority is rectifying the lack of regulation governing digital identities and Internet and social media conduct, as well as evolving and accepting a degree of control in the public interest."

In the old days, the village gossip sat in the main square passing judgement and spreading rumours, similar to the way people use the Internet today, explains António Vitorino. "The huge difference is that in those days the gossip stayed within the village: today it goes viral at the click of a button for anyone to comment on, share, judge and use against others."

This immediate and unlimited access to information is one of the Internet's most defining features, but also its Achilles heel. What we need to address is the ease with which people can set up fake profiles, accounts and hide IP addresses. This is where the real work is, says António Vitorino. "If you choose to use the Internet then you need to have a verifiable digital identity. We must have clear controls worldwide over digital identities, safeguarding the Internet and being able to hold people accountable for what they do and say."

This would be a step forwards, but if we take the recent New Zealand terrorist attacks as an example, those were committed by someone with an identifiable Internet persona, they were effectively hiding in plain sight. "So, the second question is what is permitted on the Internet and how can you bar conducts that fall foul of this?"

### **Freedom, censorship: who decides?**

While we cannot give away our freedom of expression or free speech, unfortunately we cannot stop people from 'thinking' the unthinkable, says António Vitorino. What we must put an end to is an unpoliced forum where hate, violence, racism, etc can be disseminated and acted upon, and apply real world standards to Internet conducts.

As important is how 'normal' everyday people have been transformed by the Internet, and seemingly freed from moral and social constraints. When speaking in cyber space, many times using their personal identities, they often expressive themselves in extremely offensive or utterly slanderous ways, saying things that they would never say face-to-face in the real world. The problem then is that this 'outrageous'



behavior is shared worldwide on social media triggering equally offensive/slanderous comments and often resulting in hate campaigns.

But where do we draw the line when it comes to freedom of opinion or speech? "Slander, defamation, scare mongering, racism, etc? Yes of course, that shouldn't be allowed" he says. "Use of words or conduct that incite violence or racism? Again, without a doubt."

But if we put a blanket ban on certain words or opinions, we can't forget that a great deal of art has been built on these words and opinions he adds. From the ancient Greek comedies to the rock songs of the 60s, if you just dig a little deeper you find many things that could fall into the censorship net. "Take the Sex Pistols' 'Schools are Prisons' or Pink Floyd's 'We don't need no Education' - these are touted as freedom anthems, but really these are closer to manifestos against education. Can you say they can't write those songs or express their opinions? No, you can't. But how or who do we have that will be able to take the decision on what gets banned and what gets through?" One way would be to apply double standards, policing the use of certain words or words in a certain context on the Internet while allowing them to be used in public spaces, such as print media or before live audiences.

However, this policing of the Internet cannot realistically be done by humans, it's just too big. While having AI systems in control would be another step forward, says António Vitorino, it still doesn't tackle the question of who decides what can and can't be said.

"Facebook, Instagram and other social media, all have their internal policies and can decide what words, comments and conducts will be banned, and no one has really been questioning that. That's the status of where we are now. But why should they have the right to decide how to police the Internet? Shouldn't that be our right as a community?" he asks.

### **Legislating for change**

Ultimately, we need to tackle this from both a legal and political standpoint on a worldwide basis because the Internet knows no frontiers. The builders of the Internet wanted a space that was completely free of regulation, but that was built on the assumption that everyone that uses it does so with good intentions.

While there is no current legislation in Portugal or the EU focused on Internet and social media regulation, António Vitorino believes that most of the relevant legal problems can be solved with the laws we now have. "Accountability is covered by the laws we have in place; the recourse is there to punish those that commit crimes through their Internet conduct. But those are only workable if we tackle the issue of regulating digital identities and do so on a worldwide basis. This is the first and probably most difficult step to take."

Policing the Internet begins with policing those hiding behind 'virtual personas' using and misusing information, spreading lies and hate and fabricating fake news, he adds. "We've seen it most recently at the highest levels of decision-making and influence, from the Trump campaign to Brexit. It is not just a criminal problem but a problem for society as a whole and we must bring regulation of the Internet up to speed in line with how we regulate the real world."



The second step is what sanctions we should apply to those that breach those laws. In the same way football hooligans can be banned from matches, Internet 'abusers' could be prohibited from going online. But all of this must be done within the rule of law, with appropriate safeguards and judicial control.

The bottom line is that we need to align the Internet with the real world and not the other way around or we risk living in a real-world videogame nightmare.