

Shields up!

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In our globally interconnected world, the questions of how we share and what we share is becoming increasingly important.

The Internet and the World Wide Web have lowered the barriers to broadcast communication to nearly zero. In the past, you had to have a broadcast license and a lot of money to run a television station, a radio station, a newspaper, or a magazine publishing operation that reached a large audience. Today, you need a mobile phone and an account on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, or some other social medium.

The empowerment of individuals has been nothing short of exhilarating but now we are starting to see the consequences. Freedom to speak has never been more available but in the resulting babel, truth is obscured by manufactured falsehoods, misrepresentations, fake news, alternative facts and a medley of other obscuring phenomena. 2018 may be the year in which there is a significant reaction to these side effects.

It is not inaccurate to say that this powerful enabling capacity has also introduced a range of social disruptions that some countries regard as harmful. There is pressure on the providers of the enabling platforms to filter some of the content, either in accordance with user wishes or for business reasons or because laws are enacted requiring redaction. Already there is the European Right to be Forgotten that imposes redaction requirements on search engines.

For business reasons, some content is being demonetized (that is, no ads are shown in connection with the content). There is demand that hate speech be filtered or deprioritized. In the United States, freedom of speech is of primary importance in our Bill of Rights. It is expected that speech you don't like must still be permitted. Nonetheless, it is becoming apparent that not all platforms are going to be required to permit all speech. Just the opposite.

The hard question is where to draw lines. At what point does filtering become harmful censorship? Different societies and cultures may draw lines in different places. In the global Internet, how will these differences be reconciled? 2018 may be a pivotal year in this perennial debate.


The Internet has become a mirror of our global societies. About 50% of the world's population is estimated to have access to the Internet, many of them by way of smart phones. Some people are not happy with what they see in this mirror but make the mistake of thinking that correcting the mirror will fix the problems reflected in it.

If the trend toward filtering Internet content persists and grows, it seems likely that the content that is filtered out will simply move underground to the so-called Dark Net or Dark Web. For some observers, this seems a good outcome. However, transparency is an important element in assessing the health of a society. If we cannot see the cancers on the body politic, we may fail to recognize the need for remedial response. The importance of the freedom of the press has often been invoked precisely for this reason. In our zeal to filter speech we don't like or agree with, we may obscure serious societal problems that deserve if not demand our attention.

So here is the conundrum for our increasingly connected world: how do we stay aware of what is going on in the world and in the minds of its citizens while seeking to limit the pernicious consequences of unbridled freedom to spew hatred, falsehoods and society-damaging ideologies? How do we instill a capacity for critical thinking in our citizens so they can winnow wheat from chaff? And is that a sufficient defense against the digital acid rain that threatens to poison the ocean of useful information found on the Internet?

BIO

Vinton G. Cerf is vice president and chief Internet evangelist at Google, and past president of ACM. He's widely known as one of the "fathers of the Internet." He's a Fellow of IEEE and ACM. Contact him at vgcerf@gmail.com.



The graphic features a silver bullet with a yin-yang symbol on its side. To the right of the bullet, the text reads: **THE SILVER BULLET**, SECURITY PODCAST WITH GARY MCGRAW, IEEE SECURITY & PRIVACY, and SYNOPSYS®.

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