

COLUMNS

After burning books, will they burn computers and smartphones?

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By **Fabrice Sergent**

With an invitation from French President Nicolas Sarkozy, I recently attended the e-G8 Forum in Paris.

A fantastic gathering of CEOs from global media companies all over the world, the summit's purpose was to talk about regulations and relations between heads of state and technology leaders.

Finally, I felt that the Internet had become recognized as a key component of society, necessitating an open dialogue between lawmakers and industry pioneers. Attendees included Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Google's Eric Schmidt.

Open club

Because of my background as the founder and former CEO of Club-Internet, one of the first consumer Internet service providers in France, I would like to share my thoughts on why such a forum was held this year.

Club-Internet launched in 1995 in France coincidentally, the location of the e-G8 Forum and its first television commercial was deemed controversial. It dared to position the Internet in the same category as books, envisioning the latter as condemnable by police, just as books were burned during the Crystal Night in Germany, as they posed a threat to Hitler's political power.

This sentiment stemmed from my team's passion for the open-minded network, free speech and the ability to become a true political counter-power over time.

While we frequently would be questioned about the purpose of consumers even needing an email address, our vision was that the Internet was a disruptive and powerful medium.

Should all citizens have equal access to such a network, knowledge would be better shared, collective intelligence would foster tolerance and, eventually, would lead to a better world.

Broadband access and powerful tools such as Google finally enabled the advent of the Internet as a global database of knowledge, including digital versions of reluctant traditional media.

The fast-growing number of social network users and the rise of smartphone sales trigger a new surge in creativity in the advancements for our society: information and opinion are now created and propagated by the end-users.

These end-users can form mass movements via social networks as they proved during the Arab Spring revolutions.

Smart tone

The affordability of smartphones considerably accelerated the democratization of access to the Internet: while

nearly 50 percent of Western households still do not have broadband access, most consumers can afford buying 3G/4G and WiFi-enabled smartphones.

A similar case exists in emerging countries, with penetration rates such as 5 percent for India, but more than 40 percent for Russia, the transition to smartphones is happening more rapidly than in Western countries.

Finally, the Internet has become a disruptive tool, an unparalleled opportunity since the Renaissance, to offer each person a voice and a role in a virtual public space, where opinions are debated and shared openly.

What still remains is the risk of populism, meaning, the use of such tools by dictators for their own propaganda.

Good judgment discerning the good and bad always has been a challenge to all generations, before the Internet ever existed. King Solomon asked God to give him an "understanding heart." Is there an application for that?

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