

Session 6 – Can We Trust Technological Progress?

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This session offers to examine the links between technological progress and trust.

On the one side, technical progress is responsible for the largest part of savings growth, and in that sense, it is a main source of the improvement of living conditions, in both developed and developing countries. On the other side, each wave of technical progress triggers movements of defiance: first, some innovations carry negative externalities on the environment (glyphosate), health (artificial breasts), or private life (use of personal data); then, the retention of information, its forgery or the simple fear of this, can end up eroding confidence in technological breakthroughs.

France is also the country which is the most affected by defiance towards institutions or goods and services whose utility is proven and generate a scientific consensus. It is the case of vaccines. The belief that vaccines are harmful, and worse, that the institutions of public health in France spread false information, is very disturbing because it can lead to 'under-vaccination' (in particular amongst children), and the reappearance of a number of diseases.

Besides, technical progress can destroy jobs or simply transform their structure in a way that may be threatening for individuals: this is the case for digital technologies and platform structuring. It can shift the boundaries between humans and the "artificial", as some biotechnologies do and be perceived as a threat to humanity (cloning, genetic manipulation).

As an illustration, one cannot fail to mention the use of Internet users' data that is often made without their knowledge, following searches on the Internet. Whilst it may be argued that these same Internet users post private data on their personal accounts, voluntarily posting this information in the context of a social activity should be distinguished from learning that travel data collected by road navigation sites can be stored and sold to third parties. The CNIL has put forward the concept of "no surprises" which should prevail in this matter: it should be possible to guarantee Internet users that their data will be used only for the purposes for which they are intended. Although difficult to estimate and quantify, this concept speaks for itself and its respect should improve the confidence that Internet users have in the uses that are made of their data.

These movements of distrust have multifactorial origins. One of them is the viral amplification of rumours allowed by social networks. In the case of vaccines, this phenomenon comes into play. The lack of public information on certain public health issues (admittedly, often without solutions) can also be blamed, as was the case with the "Chernobyl cloud, allegedly stopped at the eastern borders but whose responsibility has indeed been recognized in the case of cases of thyroid cancers, in particular, occurring at a distance from the event. This is also the case with tobacco, which has been repressed for decades.

In the face of all these opportunities but also of these dangers, the role of policy is essential, especially to strengthen confidence in technological progress. It must guide the societal choices, regulate when necessary, ensure compliance with the rules of the game.

Guaranteeing personal data protection on the Internet, certifying rating sites to prevent campaigns of dismissals, disseminating the necessary public health information to the public, educating young people to critical thinking and fake news checking are all means that public authorities should implement to restore confidence, or at least a salutary critical mind towards technological progress. These are the various topics that will be debated in this session.