# Trusting Digital Technologies Correctly

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Trust is a facilitator of interactions among the members of a system, would these be human agents, artificial agents or a combination of both (a hybrid system). Elsewhere, I argued that the occurrences of trust are related to, and affect, pre-existing relations, like purchasing, negotiation, communication, and delegation (Taddeo 2010a, 2010b). Trust is not to be considered a relation itself but a *property of relations*, something that changes the way relations occur. Consider, for example, a case of communication. Alice talks to Bob and she informs him that the grocery store down the road is closed for the day, as Bob trusts Alice he believes her and decides not to walk to the shop to double check, instead he starts searching for an alternative place for his grocery. Between Alice and Bob there is a *first-order relation*, the communication, which ranges over the two agents, and there is the *second-order property* of trust that ranges over the first-order-relation and affects the way it occurs.

As a property of relations, trust changes the way relations occur by minimising the effort and commitment for the achievement of a given goal of the agents who decides to trust (the trustor). It does so in two ways. First, the trustor can avoid performing the action necessary to achieve her/his goal her/himself, because s/he can count on the trustee to do it, Bob does not walk to the shop to check whether it is actually closed. Second, the trustor can decide not to supervise the trustee's performance, Bob does not ask Alice how she knows about the opening times of the shop. Delegation without supervision characterises the presence of trust (Taddeo 2010). I define trust as follows:

> Assume a set of first order-relations functional to the achievement of a goal and that two agents are involved in the relations, such that one of them (the trustor) has to achieve the given goal while the other (the trustee) is able to perform some task in order to achieve that goal. If the trustor chooses to achieve his goal through the task performed by the trustee, and if the trustor considers the trustee a trustworthy agent, then the relation has the property of being advantageous for the trustor. Such a property is a second-order property that affects the first-order relations occurring between agents and is called trust (Taddeo 2010a).

It is its facilitating role that makes trust crucial for systems to work. Without trust, delegation would be much more problematic as it would require supervision. And this, in turn, would encroach the distribution of tasks necessary for most systems to function. Imagine a society in which there is no trust in doctors, teachers, or drivers. This would require that all the members of the society spend a significant portion of time and resources controlling the way others perform their tasks, at the expenses of their own tasks.

At the same time, not all systems require the same amount of trust to work and flourish. In the medium- and long-term, too little trust may encroach the internal dynamics of the system and limit its development; but too much trust may dissolve the system because it may lead to the lack of any form of control and coordination. Striking the right level of trust it is a delicate matter and requires considering the system (mature information societies, more on these presently), the expectations of the trustor (the tasks that human agents delegate), and the nature of the trustee (the digital technologies).

Mature information societies are hybrid systems, involving human and artificial agents. And trust is a crucial component of these systems. Trust among the members of information societies is transversal. It occurs among human agents. It also characterises some of the relations among artificial agents (Primiero and Taddeo 2012). Consider, for example, how your computer trusts your phone and exchanges information with it at all times. In mature information societies, human agents also trust some artificial agents. Floridi distinguishes mature information societies from immature information societies on the basis of *'their members' unreflective and implicit expectations* to be able to rely on digital technologies (Luciano Floridi 2016a). I agree with this view. It identifies a crucial, minimalist, criterion to identify mature information societies.

As technology evolves and become more refined and effective our expectation to rely has become an expectation to *trust* (by delegating and not supervising) digital technologies with important tasks. We trust machine learning algorithms to indicate the best decision to make when hiring a future colleague or when granting parole during a criminal trial; diagnose diseases and identify possible cure. We trust robots to take care of our elderly and toddlers, to patrol borders, and to drive or fly us around the globe. We even trust digital technologies to simulate experiments and provide results that advance our scientific knowledge and understanding of the world. This trust is widespread and is resilient. It is only reassessed (rerely broken) in view of serious negative effects.

Digital technologies are so pervasive that trusting them is essential for our societies to work properly. Supervising each run of a machine learning algorithm used to make a decision would require significant time and resources, to the point that it would become unfeasible to resort to these technologies. At the same time, however, the tasks with which we trust digital technologies are of such relevance that a complete lack of supervision may lead to serious risks for our safety and security, as well for the rights and values underpinning our societies. This is a lesson that we learned when discovering the implicit bias of COMPAS and the breach that its deployment poses of the human right to fair trial.[1] COMPAS is a machine-learning based software that has been deployed in the US to assess the probability that a criminal defendant would become a recidivist and which has been shown to provide prediction strongly biased against Afro-American individuals, as ProPublica reports

> black defendants who did not recidivate over a two-year period were nearly twice as likely to be misclassified as higher risk compared to their white counterparts (45 percent vs. 23 percent).[1]

It is crucial to identify the correct way to trust digital technologies so that we can harness their value, while protecting fundamental rights and fostering the development of open, tolerant, just information societies (Floridi 2016b; Floridi and Taddeo 2016).

Digital technologies are not just tools to preform actions. Rather they are an interface through which we interact, change, perceive, and understand others and the environment surrounding us. These technologies share with the environment and with human agents the same informational nature (Floridi 2011). For this reason they can blend in *infosphere* (Floridi 2002) to the point of becoming an *invisible* interface, one that we trust and about which we forget and of which we remember only when something goes (badly) wrong, much like in the case of COMPAS. The 'trust and forget' dynamic is problematic, as it erodes human control on digital technologies and on their impact on our societies. It is this dynamic that the correct trust in digital technology avoids.

Design can play a crucial role to address this problem. Pop-up messages alerting the user that the return page for a query on a search engine is the outcome of an algorithm that has chosen those results on the basis of her profile or a message flagging that the outcome of an algorithm may not be objective are two good example of how design solutions can avoid 'trust and forget dynamics'.

However, while resorting to better technological design may help, it is not the appropriate strategy in the medium- and long term. Two main reasons support this point. First, design solutions are *ah hoc*, they address specific problems following the specific implementation of a given technology in a given context. They do not provide an overall strategy to fine-tune trust dynamics in mature information societies. Second, the correct trust in digital technologies is

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[1] https://www.propublica.org/article/how-we-analyzed-the-compas-recidivism-algorithm

defined accordingly to the way we design our societies (for example as open, pluralistic, tolerant, and just) and not according to the way in which we design digital technologies. A different approach is needed.

Mature information societies require a normative infrastructure to breed responsible trust and limiting the spreading of 'trust and forget dynamics'. This infrastructure should encompass norms enforcing transparency on the way digital technologies are deployed, for example when making decision concerning human beings (Wachter, Mittelstadt, and Floridi 2017); prescribing meaningful human oversight, for example when deploying autonomous technologies for security (Taddeo 2013) and national defence purposes; defining policies to ascribe liabilities of designers, providers, and users of digital technologies (Floridi 2016c). The alternative is to risk losing stewardship of the deployment of digital technologies and hence of the development of the societies that rely on them.

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