

Trust, security and insecurity

J. Peter Burgess

What is trust?

Trust is the greatest virtue and the greatest flaws of human beings. To extend trust to another human being is to create a bond, form a relationship that is bigger than two individuals. It is to express a force that cannot be accounted for, cannot be reduced to something rational or instrumental. To the extent that it is issue of fallible judgement it can bring the most disastrous consequences.

Trust is unpredictable. By virtue of building on a foundation of emotion, intuition, spirit, etc., it resists prediction. Indeed, if we could predict trust, if the occurrence of trust, or its disappearance could be foreseen, it would not be trust.

Trust is indeed a kind of certainty. It is a replacement for certainty, a stopgap, a compromise. When we do not know, we trust. Trust is the placeholder in any equation that involves knowledge.

A typology of trust

Here is a typology of trust. It begins with a simple and slightly problematic distinction between trust in *things* and trust in *persons*. From this distinction we can differentiate

Trust in things can be differentiated as trust in inert or non-transformative things and trust in transformative things, that is, things that, given a certain input, play a function. This is the broadest definition of a technology. It can include tools, machines, drugs, etc. We can trust in *something* and we can trust in *someone*. When we trust in *something* we believe without knowing that something is true about it. I trust the sun will shine, I trust the shop will be open. I trust the tool will carry out its function. I trust the machine will not fail, etc.

Trust in persons can be differentiated along levels of intentionality: (1) Does a person pronounce *true* statements? (2) Does the person carry out acts in correspondence with *intention*? Does the person *act* in accordance with the expectations of others? When we trust *someone*, we are engaging in an ethical logic, considering that the other will do what the person said he or she would do, banking on an identity between intention and event, betting that the person not only has the intent of carrying out something promised, but also the ability to carry it out.

Trust in someone is a kind of contract a contract based on a certain limited liability, a liability that projects in the reverse direction from an ordinary contract. If the contract fails, if the other party does not deliver what had expected through my act of trust, then the liability, the 'fault' lies not simply with the one who failed, but with the one who trusted.

Both of these categories and their subcategories will be meaningful for an investigation of the link between trust, security and insecurity.

Security and trust

We can for this reason not seek security in trust. If we understand security to be something to count on, something that is sure, something that resists contingency, the accidental the, the unexpected, then trust is not the place to seek security.

Nonetheless, trust is absolutely essential to security. Despite our technological ambitions, our dream or even fantasy of 100% security, 0 risk, security cannot be marshalled as certainty. On the contrary, security is what we seek in the face of uncertainty. And trust is the only certainty we can have.

Trust and risk

Trust implies a moment of risk. Trust implies acting when the adequate conditions for knowing how best to act are not present. In this sense trust is the experience of a certain kind of insecurity, of carrying on even though we do not know what the consequences might be.

On the other hand, trust is a means to security. It is a replacement for insecurity, a replacement for the knowledge that would bring security. It is ersatz-security.

Trust in security institutions

Trust, pragmatically speaking, is the pre-condition for all intuitions, security institutions among them. The complete functioning of any institution can never be entirely visible or entirely known. It lies in the nature of an institution that it presents itself to its users as a whole, as a black box with a simple façade. If an institution were fully exposed, if all its structures, content, the rules of circulation of its elements, its patterns and internal functions were exposed, available, known to all, it would not be an institution.

The functionality of any institution depends on a certain kind of trust. We communicate with the institution, make our inputs, interact with it, and in as much put our trust in it, engage a contract of sorts. We expect that the institution will respond, through its transformative mechanisms to our needs or our expectations. An institution is a machine whose parts remain

unknown. Even some sort of 'money back' guarantee will reimburse us the human cost of the interaction.

Trust in technology

Technology responds to a particular human desire, a particular fantasy. That fantasy is to replace fallible, undependable human beings with more dependable mechanism that carry out the task in a more trustworthy way.

According to certain criteria, technologies can do 'it' better, faster, more accurately. Assuming that 'better', 'faster' and more 'accurately' actually are qualities of goodness and the natural or even logical aspiration of humans, the gain of replacing humans with technologies solutions is high.

That replacement and the emulation it implies is however paradoxical. In order to authentically replace humans, machines would have to limit their capacities, so their speed, dull their precision, etc. To emulate human conduct, human perception we must lower the standard, the threshold the level of resolution, etc. In short they must become less technological.

Resilience and trust

Trust is sometimes linked to the notion of resilience. Resilience is originally a technical term, growing from a technological perspective toward uncertainty. Trust has its origins in a social setting, but it rediscovers itself, particularly through the field of security research, in its link to technological systems.

Trust is thus about a special kind of *dependency*, common to both technical and social systems: we can never know enough about our partners, understand enough about the complex devices we use to fight them, in order to make fully logical decisions. It is a dependency that grows out of a shared experience, shared values, shared culture or traditions, but above all a sense of share humanity.

This shared experience is the crux of security and insecurity, and the key to social, cultural and technological interoperability. Without trust, it is impossible to make use of a critical instrument or part manufactured by someone else, impossible to have crucial confidence in the interpretation of sensitive security-relevant data, and impossible to regard a security professional from the far corner of Europe as involved in the common project of European security.

Trust and democracy

Trust is a logic of the unknown. The role of trust in assuring security will play an ever more

central role in the way Europeans face the dangers of the unknown. The role of trust becomes particularly acute to the extent security challenges are seen as people-oriented. Health and human services are core examples of this.

But trust in complex systems, such as those central to information technology cannot be made viable by technological excellence alone. The degree to which such systems are socially dependable and thus capable of evoking an experience of security depends on how well they are embedded in society.

Similarly, trust issues form the scope of a number of border security issues. Documents and data, practices must be reliable across cultures and national borders. Programmes such as the 'registered traveler' must hold the confidence of users that they are fair and just. Information transparency in security matters is not only about the trueness of available documents, but also about the reliability of claims to transparency. The civil security challenges presented by crisis management depend highly on the trust of the public.

Conclusion

The security of citizens is increasingly dependent upon their own trust in the people and technologies supposed to assure it. As the complexity of technologically based security systems grows and the ability of citizens to understand and control the technologies that surround them, trust in their ordered functioning and the dependability of their operators becomes crucial. Trust refers to the willingness of European citizens to put their lives and well-being into the hands of others. It concerns their belief in different security systems and their operators. Trust is, finally, the very source of the legitimacy of those democratic institutions entrusted with our security.