All.Net Analyst Report and Newsletter

Welcome to our Analyst Report and Newsletter

Trust and worthiness

It seems clear to me that trust in digital systems is, appropriately, collapsing. This owing largely to the realization by many that they over-trusted these systems and that these systems are not the panacea they appeared to be. In my view, this is a good thing. Realistic views and expectations are the things that bring better decisions. But at the same time, vision and visionaries are necessary to progress, and risk taking is fundamental to progress.

The question that ultimately should but apparently cannot be answered is how to reconcile trust and worthiness.

A market approach and human perceptions of change

Notionally, as a market sort of approach, trust eventually adapts to meet historical worthiness. That is, we will actually trust what/who has been worthy of that trust in the past, assuming we get truthful information about past performance. That's quite an assumption of course, as those who are unworthy of trust are motivated to deceive and those who are worthy of trust are motivated not to. As we adapt to trust those who make and admit to occasional mistakes, those who are not worthy will mimic that behavior and we will still not be able to tell. Without ground truth, we are hard pressed to tell truth from deception in a timely fashion.

The problem we have today is part of the nature of humans and technology changes. First we distrust anything new. Then when it proves to be worth more than we thought, we over-trust it. That's about where we have been in the emerging part of the information technology space.

Later on, when it proves problematic, we reduce our trust, usually too far because we feel betrayed. That's where we are going now, and it relates to the practical realization of the problems facing individuals and society as a result of the movement to the information age.

The government, comprised of individuals, is listening to our everything, and some of the individuals go beyond the legitimate scope and don't get detected except when they self-report. So those who are dishonest enough to do bad things but honest or afraid enough to admit it, get punished, while those who do the right things are not rewarded, and those who do the wrong things are not detected or punished. We (the people) increasingly distrust them (some of the people) because we over-trusted them in the first place because they (other of the people) told us to. It's really our (some of the people) fault for listening to them and not the lessons of history as a basis for trusting them (whoever) in the first place.

Hopefully the pattern will be recognizable from other folks you have trusted in the past who proved less worthy than you hoped, and then more worthy than you disdained them to be, and in the future when it comes up again, but I doubt it.

Human nature and the emergence of ideas

As a general rule, but not universally so, people tend to originally distrust new things that are worthy of more trust than is given. Perhaps this is because these things are new and we don't have an established basis to trust them. Except of course for confidence experts who gain trust when not deserved, typically by behaving in ways we misinterpret as trustworthy.

Over time, things that are worthy but not trusted may demonstrate worthiness. Then, as we come to over-trust them, they often become less worthy because of growth, exhaustion, and similar factors. Then, over time they become more worthy as they encounter and adapt better to realities, all of course only for those things that survive the process.

It would be better if we trusted good ideas right away and not bad ideas, but we don't seem to be able to do that so well. Perhaps we could decide to trust people who have proven successful in the past? Like Bernie Madoff? How about trusting ideas we think are really good and people who we think are really smart? It might work. Or perhaps we just need good statistics and to accept the risks and spread the investments while adapting over time? That's good for stable environments where you have the resources to make a lot of such bets, and part of the reason the rich get richer.

Worthiness is a tricky business, and the cycles are a big problem. If we could have less lag between worthiness and trust it would be better for us, but whatever the cycles are, the alignment problems are always likely to remain because a good confidence expert will figure out how to synchronize with trust when they are not worthy. So it is with malicious actors.

Trust for what?

I have up to here avoided the question of "trust for what?", so it's time to address it. I think it would be useful to know, with defined levels of certainty relative to metrics of some sort, levels of trust and worthiness of trust for various purposes for various things over time (starting from long ago and going to long into the future).

I hypothesize that this is not about to happen anytime soon, but that progress would come in the form of getting further from here and closer to there. In my view, the recognition of the underlying nature of the overarching problem is fundamental to progress, and relating everything to that fundamental is the basis of sound research and progress over time.

To be clear, I don't claim to have an exclusive with regard to my notions surrounding the challenges we face. But this is where I start from and where I get to when I start there. So if you have a different starting point, path, and destination, please make them clear and propose in that context.

I think that if we take this general notional approach and use history to determine what to trust for what on that basis, we will do better than we have been doing as a society. The notion of trusting "the government" (our fellow citizens given power and money by us) to do the right thing when we cede to them enormous power and access without any real transparency is a huge problem. Perhaps the only solution is to infuse the government with our allies, folks who we trust because they are like us, or our relatives, or our friends and neighbors, or they go to the same religious institution, or they proclaim the same view, and we believe we will find out because they will tell us. It's called infiltration, and it works.

Summary

Put another way, infiltration is becoming one of the members of the in crowd. It's also called participating. The best way to understand, gain, and assure trust is to remember the past and participate in building the future. If we want a trustworthy future, we have to build it by being part of it. You can't build trust from the outside, you have to do it from the inside. So join in, group together, become part of the world you live in, and help to make it worthy of the trust we will all ultimately have to put in it if we want to live in a civil society over time.