

The digitized world we live in today is so radically different from everything before it that we can talk about a revolution, similar to the one brought about by the invention of the steam engine in the 18th century and the beginning of the industrial era, or the Fordian revolution in the early 20th century that made motor cars available to the broad masses of people. Like then, we now need a totally new understanding of what a contemporary society is and how it functions.

In the era of horse-drawn carriages, there was no need for highway overpasses. The mass production of cars brought about the need for a totally different network of roads and city infrastructures. Similarly, we now need a digital infrastructure to support a society where practically everyone owns a computer or a mobile device through which they are connected to everyone else in the world, and where many of the basic functions of society have gone online.

Estonia has been a builder of those new roads. But this new infrastructure means that we also need new "traffic rules": laws and regulations that make navigating the new roads safe and smooth.

In the new digital world, any country that wishes to be considered modern and successful must understand that it has to exist online as well as offline. This means more than just applying the available technology to take existing paper services online. Once public services are online, democracy needs to get online as well.

Estonia has done well in these areas. Through our digital innovations, we have become a model of the future state. Excellent examples of e-Governance have been available here for more than a decade. And now we see civil society and popular movements using the Internet as their platform; we see online crowdsourcing used as a means of policy-making and civic engagement.

Ten years of development projects and training all over the world have spread the word about our e-Governance as a tool for efficiency, but we need to aim higher. We need to use our technological advancement to promote the values we believe in: freedom of speech, the rule of law, and the protection of fundamental human rights.

It is no accident that Estonia has been rated No 1 in the world, ahead of the USA and Germany, in Internet freedom by Freedom House for three years in a row. As a member of the Internet Freedom Coalition, we are committed to protecting Internet freedom in the world.

The e-society is not just a matter of technology. It is a way of life, a vision. Stewart Brand, an early architect of the idea of information freedom, has said: You can't change human nature, but you can change tools and techniques.

This is what our idea of e-Governance is about. We create tools that contribute to freedom and prosperity and increase the openness and transparency of decision making. And yet transparency, a cherished liberal value that helps fight corruption, in some cases contradicts another important democratic value: privacy. Seeking the right balance between these competing values is a challenge we will have to deal with.

The Estonian e-Governance system, our technology and our vision have had a wide International reach. We have an IT expert consulting the British government. The Palestinian authority and Moldova are going to use Estonian online authentication services. Finland is contemplating creating a digital infrastructure similar to the Estonian X-Road.

But we must be careful not to get stuck merely spreading the implementation of the technology we have. We need to think further about the digital society we now live in, about how it affects our democracy, our people, our education, our laws and our culture. We need experts in many different fields who understand the technology that shapes our world. And we need research on outcomes, the effects on society, e-Governance, the e-state and the whole digital way of life.

I hope that Estonia, having been an early adaptor of new technology, will also become a hub where modern society is being thought of in depth. Just as there was a vision at the beginning of the ICT revolution, we still need a vision. Or, to paraphrase the late Steve Jobs: we still need to stay hungry and foolish. This is only the beginning.