

An 'open' Internet without gatekeepers

April 26 2006

Professor Jonathan Zittrain, first Professor of Internet Governance and Regulation, stressed the importance of an 'open' Internet in his inaugural lecture.

How do we keep the Internet free of gatekeepers and yet guard against the badware or bad code, like viruses and spyware, that disrupts our lives and invades our privacy? That was the thorny issue that Professor Jonathan Zittrain, first Professor of Internet Governance and Regulation, addressed in his inaugural lecture entitled 'The future of the Internet – and how to stop it.'

During his lecture at the Examination Schools in Oxford on Tuesday, Professor Zittrain stressed the importance of an 'open' Internet. He said: 'I study the future of the Internet from the perspective of wanting to maintain the Internet's 'generativity' – its capacity to produce extraordinary change for the good of the world by allowing people anywhere to develop and share new software and new uses without any gatekeepers.'

But he warned that the Internet's channels of communication were also channels of control that were both its best feature and its gravest danger. He said concerns about badware could lead to a consumer backlash against the current trend for openness, with the public wanting 'locked down' PCs that don't just run any code from anywhere. In his view, a potential danger would be for a firm to acquire a 'missile battery', that was so successful at shooting down badware that everyone subscribed to it, so that one firm became gatekeeper for what ran and what did not.

To safeguard the future of a more ‘open’ Internet, Professor Zittrain concluded that the way ahead was to develop tools for the general Internet that the public could use. This would give them information about the codes they encountered so they could make informed decisions about whether to use them or not; power would thereby remain in the hands of those logging on, rather than a corporate gatekeeper.

Another issue explored during Professor Zittrain’s lecture, was the potential of the Internet for scholars and students around the world. He argued: ‘Universities should encourage or even require their faculties to publish in open access journals and to publish working papers ahead of final drafts, so that their work is not locked up by some journal copyrights which are increasingly testing the budgets of libraries who wish to subscribe.’ He argued that as scholars increasingly specialise, the pool of peers who can genuinely review their work shrinks. He left the audience wondering how the Internet might be a standing invitation for scholars to pool their knowledge on meaningful projects in order to produce important work.

Click here for a [webcast of the lecture](#).

Source: University of Oxford

Citation: An 'open' Internet without gatekeepers (2006, April 26) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2006-04-internet-gatekeepers.html>

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