

INTERNET THE BIG BAD OCEAN

Muhammad Zafrullah

Let's face it we are blessed with another big bad ocean, the internet. The first big bad ocean made us, if we go by the scientific oriented theories about the origins of life, but this new one is of our own making. These strange thoughts occur to me when I surf the net and when I hear stories such as a big giant such as Google having to pay up for some excesses. Things came to a head when I read:

http://www.salon.com/2013/04/22/google_fined_by_data_protection_group_ap/?source=newsletter

The question that, essentially, set off the analogy was: Did the top management of Google know what was going on? In the following I will try to develop the big bad ocean analogy and to answer the question in a sort of roundabout way. My treatment would, at best, be sketchy and superficial; not by design but by necessity as I do not know much about either of the oceans. Of course if any reader can develop the analogy further and has enough clout he/she it can try to own it.

We know, in a general sort of way, that today we do not have one ocean, there are several names that float around, but it is a big connected body of water and so can be called one ocean. Though in an early part of the history of our planet there were small puddle-like reservoirs, resting in cooler corners of the globe, away from the seething bubbling lava. As the lava cooled, some more water came from God knows where to make the big ocean that we have now. Speculations abound, but hey we have no business there.

In a similar fashion the internet started in the form of small networks in the sixties, away from the bustle of printing presses, teleprinters and the like. Before I get on with the analogy I should give a reference or two for those who may want to check to see if I am not having them on:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet> or for a more satisfying account:

<http://www.nethistory.info/History%20of%20the%20Internet/pcnets.html>

There had to be computers before the internet started and so let me assume that you know when, and how, the computers started being used. They were huge and could only be used by some academic or research organizations. Of course the employees of such an organization needed to communicate with each other and so a communications network came to be. But such networks were few and far between, just like the puddles of water that preceded the big bad ocean.

Being on a network and working with another network became "internetworking" and later, in 1974, "internet" started meaning "internetworking". It stayed, for a while a sort of means of communication for computer geeks and then for scientists and mathematicians who wanted to explore certain numerical solutions for their problems on other networks. Then in the 1990s, as the personal computers started coming into vogue and as the commercial applications of networking presented themselves there was the World Wide Web, now another name for internet.

The ocean works in mysterious ways driven by earth's position, winds, and temperatures, etc. producing cold and warm currents which cause all kinds of weather systems on the globe and which help sustain

the marine life. Of course the big bad ocean is our big provider directly as a source of food and communications and indirectly as a source of rain.

The internet too works in ways that are mysterious to a lay person like me, but human intellect, resourcefulness and ingenuity are causing all the currents in this big bad man-made ocean. Of course, and this may be a bad analogy, the ships here are the various carriers that provide means of communications. It would be hard to tell what would be waves on the internet but heck the whole of internet rides on waves and I can only guess at what would be the surf, but let's not get carried away.

Next, fish are usually the most mentioned produce from the ocean and data in the form of information can be considered the produce of the internet. Of course this information, if properly processed, can be turned into money which can be used to buy food or other amenities such as influence and new buildings. Now as there are big trawler companies to catch fish and other marine life from the ocean there are big companies, such as Google, running search engines to catch data so that it can be offered in return for folks using more and more of that search engine and thus increasing the revenue from various ads.

But this is where the major difference lies. The fishing companies have their fishermen on board the trawlers doing exactly what they are told, e.g., if a whale is caught in the net then scuttle the net or something like that. On the other hand the workforce of the big internet giants is onboard nothing. A majority of them are in their own dinghies or tubs (personal computers) floating more or less independently and doing what they want freely, often mingled their work with their own personal business/hate.

These floaters are cheap, very useful, and essential for providing cheaper free services. But, the cheaper you are the more irresponsible you can get, especially when there's no mechanism for oversight and/or accountability. Such irresponsible acts can only cause bad blood as in my case. I'm not proud of writing [1] but in [1] I cited some examples of irresponsible web- address writing. Of course those examples may now have been removed but there certainly will be others.

The examples that I mentioned in [1] were of course minor, some mean thug sitting at his desk decided to insult some minor character. But when it comes to infringing upon the rights to privacy of some folks, ordinarily of not much clout but, covered by some giant such as the agency that fined Google, justice does get served. But was justice served? How do you ascertain that the records were deleted as claimed by Google or they were sold and resold by folks loosely connected with Google?

In the absence of accountability usually the miscreants go scot free and someone who had signed approval of some misleading paper-work gets the brow-beating or the boot or if the punishment is not severe as in the case of German data protection agency against Google not even a slap on the wrist. The fine for Google was peanuts as compared to the profits it raked. To Google and other big giants who rely on cheap data collection floaters all I can say is: If you win a war using mercenaries, be prepared to fight them at some point.

Let me try to continue with the analogy a bit further. The big bad ocean has a tradition of hiding/housing pirates; pirates who have often been regarded as despicable scoundrels by some sea-faring nations and as heroes by others. The hackers are the internet actors who can be immediately assigned the status of pirates.

But just like the pirates in the big bad ocean it's hard to tell if a floater is a pirate or not. In the old days a sailing ships hoisting a flag stressing allegiance with a certain nation would look perfectly normal until it shot at you and now information provided by a web-bot would look perfectly normal until you realize that it is false and so the bot must be the work of some floater working on the cheap who decided to take things in his/her own hands. It so happens that I came across something like that. Let me refer you to where I mention it on the internet: <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.math/2005-07/msg04124.html>

Indeed I conceded in the analysis in the above link that it could be an honest mistake on the part of the web-bot but knowing that web-bots are driven by search terms and that changing search terms could play havoc on the value of the information gathered, I tend to think there was some human intervention. This view got strengthened when I came across the examples mentioned in [1].

The original big bad ocean does a big service to us by taking in the rubbish that we throw in it and cleaning it. It has done it since God only knows when. But there is always a limit to what it can do for us. Now we have polluted it so much that there is concern that some fish from the sea have so much mercury in them that it is unhealthy to eat them. So if we do not stop contaminating it, one day it will be useless as a source for food.

On the other hand the big bad ocean of our own making, the internet, has no natural built in cleansing mechanism and looking at the amount of confusing and unsupported information that we let float in it, it is fast becoming an unreliable source of information. Now the thing is we made it so we'll have to find ways to clean it. One way of keeping our big bad ocean is to introduce some kind of control on the information that goes in there.

I am not asking for control on the content, as that might be considered a violation of the freedom of expression. But there should be some way of directly finding out who put certain content on the net. Let me mention here the case of the video: "Innocence of Muslims" that caused uproar in the Muslim world and around 75 deaths, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Innocence_of_Muslims The perpetrator of this monstrosity, **Nakoula Basseley Nakoula**, was caught some time after that mayhem.

Here's an example that I mentioned in [1]. This is how the link was given to paper of mine that I wrote with Alain Bouvier, now a big name in Education in France: **M Zafrullah - 1988 - pakistan.xnnporen.lohar.com** and I copied it from Google, as I indicated in [1]. Of course it only raised my blood pressure and I wrote [1], but think of what such pranks that I mention in [1] can do to the reputation of the internet.

I have limited this write up to my personal experiences as I am one of the most important persons in my life. But if you care to look around and Google for "incorrect link" or "I have been hacked" you would find stories such as: <https://plus.google.com/105176419976891193186/posts/LDn1D4GCuXY>

Or: <http://productforums.google.com/forum/#!topic/websearch/pH-mhgIH4>

There is, of course a lot more where these came from but I do not want all these to spoil the light character of this presentation.

Let me end this with the sermon: Thanks to the way the Almighty has set us living beings up we are essentially machines that turn the goodies produced by nature into poop, pee and other rubbish. God Almighty gave the pooping peeing machines the humans the ability to think and learn. We used this ability to create stuff of our own and internet is a very good example of that. Experience tells us that when we let our creations go out of control they can only hurt us. So don't let the internet get out of control.

Reference:

[1] M. Zafrullah, [Perks of being who I am, I](http://open.salon.com/blog/mzafrullah/2012/01/15/perks_of_being_who_i_am_i)
http://open.salon.com/blog/mzafrullah/2012/01/15/perks_of_being_who_i_am_i