

16th World Knowledge Forum

2050 Megatrend

Speakers:

Don Tapscott (CEO, Tapscott Group, Author of The Digital Economy)

Nathan Blecharczyk (Airbnb, Co-Founder)

Jason Pontin (MIT Technology Review, Editor in Chief)

Harry S. Dent, Jr. (Dent Research, Senior Editor / Author of The Demographic Cliff)

Moderator:

Thierry de Montbrial (French Institute of International Relations (Ifri), Executive Chairman)

The 16th World Knowledge Forum opened on October 20, 2015, with the theme Mapping the Zeitgeist. Perhaps one of the most fitting sessions for this theme was 2050 Megatrend, a panel discussion that aimed to define our future society. Four panelists shared their perspectives and concerns on how technological trends of the future will transform our world in the next 30 years.

Don Tapscott, CEO of Tapscott Group and author of The Digital Economy, touched on six trends of technology in the digital age: the social web, its impact on individuals, big data, the Internet of Things (IoT), cloud technology, and robotics.

“[The mobile web’s] impact on individuals is powerful and hard to describe,” he said. Platforms are created to share data, which allows companies and individuals to become immensely connected.

He shared a story of a 14-year-old girl he met in Kenya who had no access to electricity, but was still able to power her mobile phone with a solar charger. This illustrated how mobile devices and the web act as a window to other societies, opening up endless opportunities for an individual.

Mr. Tapscott also highlighted the positive and negative impacts of robotics. He firmly stated that robots perform better than humans in many different fields, which will eventually take away jobs.

Jason Pontin, the Editor in Chief at the MIT Technology Review, added to this argument. He explained that automating tasks has become cheaper than human labor.

“This, [combined with globalization and wage stagnation], will be the fundamental problems of the future. Over the next 2 to 3 decades, all jobs are in danger,” he said.

Mr. Pontin then added his own list of three technologies he believes will have a profound impact in the near and distant future.

Mr. Pontin explained that CRISPR/Cas9, which allows biologists to edit individual genes, will have a great impact on molecular biology, health, and environmental sectors. He expressed concerns, stating, “CRISPR/Cas9 will be used for preventative measures... to eliminate diseases such as cancer... but we know that some people might use this for things that we might be ambiguous about.”

Mr. Pontin also touched on the revolution in Artificial Intelligence (AI). He said that for the past 20 to 30 years, AI technology was in a period of “very little progress.”

“Computer scientists tried to model the human mind without understanding the human mind,” he said, explaining the reason for this “AI winter” as he coined it. However, he said that AI has begun to produce breakthroughs by using very simple algorithms to recognize patterns, leading to a revolution in automation.

Also on the panel was Nathan Blecharczyk, the Co-founder of Airbnb. Mr. Blecharczyk highlighted the trends of the sharing economy: urbanization, technological development, IoT, demographic shifts, and the increase in

the cost of consumption.

“[These trends] will create the necessary foundation for a sharing economy... where people have assets and knowledge that may not be utilized and technology allows these assets and knowledge to be shared and monetized,” he said, adding, “Collaborative consumption will produce a more sustainable future.”

Harry S. Dent Jr., the author of *The Demographic Cliff*, joined the discussion by explaining where societies are headed from the perspective of demographic change. Mr. Dent predicted that the demographic shift, which hit its peak from 2003-2007, is now headed for the "demographic cliff." He added that developed countries such as the U.S., Germany, England, Switzerland, and Korea are all headed there.

Offering a brighter note, Mr. Dent said, “China and India will be the first emerging markets to experience growth in a few decades.”

To conclude the panel discussion, Mr. Tapscott shared his prospects on the future of new technology.

“Technology is just a tool that people can use to implement change. My generation cannot change the future. That task is left to the next generation,” he said, “but the future is something to be achieved, not fixed.”