**Technology for Humanity**

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[**Bio**](https://scs.georgetown.edu/programs/77/master-of-professional-studies-in-technology-management/faculty-bio/3916/sarah-mccue)

**Will Connectivity Progress Humanity?**

The United Nations estimates that 3.6 billion people, almost half of the world’s population, currently lack access to the Internet.  However, in less than a decade, the UN is predicting that most every person will have safe and affordable access to the Internet.

This universal connectivity is expected by 2030, and it is breathtaking to ponder what the world will be like when most are interconnected.  Will greater peace, prosperity, education, cultural understanding, transparency, and overall happiness increase, or, instead, will universal access to the Internet result in more war and violence, less prosperity, no greater access to education, the same levels of corruption, and a world population that is more anxious, isolated and depressed?

To predict the future, we must know our past.  We must understand how connectivity has profoundly changed our way of life since the Internet took hold in the mid-1980s, including impact on mental and physical health, loss of human connection, transformation of physical communities, loss of privacy, and attacks on truth.

**Impact on Physical and Mental Health**

In 2020, average daily digital content consumption was six hours and 59 minutes, which includes phone, television, desktop and other devices. As screen time increases each year, the worldwide prevalence of adult and child obesity has nearly doubled since 1980, with vision problems increasing at a staggering rate – e.g., in six-year-olds, prevalence of short-sightedness was three times higher in 2020 than in 2015.

There is an equally alarming increase in mental illness. The World Health Organization found a 13% rise in mental health conditions in the last decade including depression, anxiety, eating and substance abuse disorders.  Rates of depression increased by 52% between 2005 and 2017 among adolescents aged 12 to 17 years old, and suicide rates surged to a 30-year high in 2016.

**Loss of Human Connection**

Since 1980, those who felt lonely more than doubled, with reports of loneliness and depression skyrocketing during lockdowns, quarantine and forced isolation during the global pandemic.

Societies around the globe are grappling with double-digit increases in struggles with self-esteem, loss of human connection and a growing disconnect to community, largely due to addictions to devices, social media, online gaming, and online pornography.

Research is showing far less emphasis on human experience and connection due to technological isolation with self-reported declines in spirituality, numbers of friends, and future planning of meaningful experiences.

**Transformation of Physical Communities**

As more time is spent online, our physical sense of community is transforming -- public buildings are slowly disappearing including banks, post offices, malls, downtowns, small shops and retail chains, office buildings, and parking garages are not as ubiquitous as they once were, with many suggesting that soon they will disappear altogether.

Online shopping is slowly replacing grocery stores, clothing stores, bookstores, office and pet supplies stores, restaurants, pharmacies, and most businesses that can deliver its products or services online.  Most retailers are either closing or cutting back on physical stores and moving into warehouse distribution with online storefronts forming the bulk of their business.

It is anticipated that increased global connectivity will fuel the dominance of e-commerce platforms such as Amazon, Alibaba, JD, Pinduoduo and others, leading to the disappearance of small businesses, not just in the U.S. but globally, fueling a global trend toward online purchase of the majority of things we used to buy in person with the dismantling of small stores and the incomes of the people who used to work inside them.

**Loss of Privacy**

Threats to privacy have reached crisis levels due to endless data protection disasters from viruses that destroy data and take down systems, spyware and cyberstalking, GPS location tracking, selling of our personal information including financial and health records, social profiling and government use of social network websites in investigations without a search warrant, ubiquity of facial recognition software, smart home devices monitoring personal activity including AI-powered surveillance cameras, lax protection of data stored in the cloud, and monitoring of our browsing history and search queries by cookies that track your every keystroke, sending your search history without your knowledge to online advertisers.

As billions of global citizens gain access to connectivity in the next ten years, we must better protect their right to privacy in all digital realms.

**Attacks on Truth**

Publishing fact is tightly controlled by traditional news outlets.  Unfortunately, publishing truth is not as tightly controlled by Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, YouTube and other global social media corporations that allow for opinions and often misinformation of billions of individuals to be published on their platforms.

These publishing platforms are not held to the same standards that news publishers are compelled to uphold, allowing anyone with a social media account to act as a reporter or opinion writer, resulting in a global proliferation of obscene, hurtful, libelous, slanderous, and false information that has placed democratic principles in the most significant peril since World War Two.

All nations – particularly those who are facilitating their citizen’s access to the Internet in the next several years -- must fight against publishing content that misrepresents fact.

**Is There Hope That Connectivity Will Progress Humanity?**

We must remain hopeful that connectivity will progress humanity, but we have reached a crisis point as we begin to understand the profound impact that access to the Internet has had on our minds, bodies, relationships, our children, our communities, our traditions, and our way of life.

The potential for harm to individuals and societies, continuous violations of trust, rise of global tech monopolies, and the power that an individual or private firm can wield over one person, or vast billions requires a hard look at what has been, and can still be, wrought.

As billions come online in the next decade, we must strive to be the best of ourselves through individual empowerment, cultural understanding, community engagement, activism, conflict resolution, compromise, and positive change in self, community, nation, and world.  Our minds and bodies must be healthier, we must strive for far more human connection, we must protect our privacy, and we must demand that fact and truth is paramount and sacred.

No one can predict the future or what it will look like when the entire human population is connected to the Internet, but we can certainly shape the future we want for our children and ourselves.