

Technology Dialogue Group

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"Technology is stitching together all the minds of the living, wrapping the planet in a vibrating cloak of electronic nerves. How can this not stir that organ in us that is sensitive to something larger than ourselves?" - Kevin Kelly (Founding Editor of Wired magazine)

During the previous 70 years, advances in commercial aviation have made global travel increasingly accessible, allowing us to be physically closer to those we once considered strangers. In just the last two decades, the Internet has changed the way in which we relate to each other through greater access to information and the rise of social media. In contrast to the 1.45 billion expected passengers on international flights this year, Facebook currently has more than 1.75 billion active users a month. This acceleration in communication technologies provides us with unique opportunities and challenges as we navigate the widened vista available to us through these increasingly prevalent social tools.

Considering the impact of communication technologies on our close relationships, the small electronic devices we carry in our pockets have the ability to make connections with long lost relatives or instantly send a message to a friend we may previously have rarely made contact with. However, are these connections meaningful or do they merely distract us from the physical relationships in front of us that can take second place to a bleeping phone that lures us to answer? When friends sit around a restaurant table staring at their screens instead of engaging with each other, do we need to reassess our relationship to technology and rekindle the relationships with those in close proximity? In connecting to the world via our computers, tablets and phones, have we become strangers to ourselves, our families and our neighbours?

At a societal level, technology has the potential to aid democracy and free speech. Anyone with Internet access can gain a voice and share his or her unique life experiences and opinions with strangers through a myriad of media such as forums, video sharing, and blog posts. Social networking tools such as Twitter were credited with allowing the wider world to hear first-hand experience of the Arab Spring. LinkedIn allows anyone to create a professional profile of record giving every member of the global workforce greater access to

economic opportunities. When members of the U.K. public were surveyed recently regarding their views on immigration, those exposed to a picture of a wounded young boy caught in the Syrian conflict, that went viral across the media and social web, were 50 percent more likely to accept immigrants into the U.K. than those who were not. As these technologies increasingly gain the power to instantly distribute powerful messages that reach billions of people, can we rely on market forces and the good nature of the leaders of these commercial social networks to “do no evil” (to paraphrase Google’s motto)? Or should technology companies be subjected to an agreed global moral framework within which to operate?

Current and emerging technology has the power to transcend our boundaries and make connections with our fellow human beings. It is up to us, the users of technology, to discuss and shape the role it plays in our personal, national and global lives. The power is on our desktops, in our pockets, and in our hands.