Futurist: More changes in next 20 years than last 300

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THE next 20 years are likely to bring more changes to humanity than the past 300 years, futurist Gerd Leonhard declared on Wednesday.

The founder and chief executive of The Futures Agency, speaking at CommunicAsia 2016, predicted that in the next five years, increased global connectivity, super-computing and more powerful interfaces will bring about exponential changes in how people communicate, consume media and content, do business and learn and design our future.

Mr Leonhard, who has had more than 1,500 engagements in more than 40 countries since 2005, said global digital transformation is bringing about an age of digital "ations" - digitisation, screenification, automation,

virtualisation and the like - which raise the question of what it means to be human in a digitally transformed future.

Already, society is already nearly at the point at which few ideas seem to remain in the realm of science fiction for long.

We can thus expect intelligent software and machines of all kinds to play an increasingly larger role in communication, and drive rapid growth in the video and radio streaming industries, he said.

Over the Top (OTT) broadcasting - the business of streaming services like Netflix, which provide TV shows and films via the Internet, bypassing traditional cable TV service providers - will become the new normal, and computing will become "invisible", he predicted.

And with the world becoming increasingly hyper-connected, technology will become omnipresent and become "normalised, a part of the very fabric of our environment".

The nature of people's interactions with each other and the fundamentals of our environment will change; "everything that can become digital will indeed become digital" in an era of "smart-everything".

This will have a major impact on society, culture and business; the future will present society with the means to revolutionise industrial processes and increase efficiency through "smart farming", "smart logistics" and "smart transportation".

On the other hand, with artificial intelligence (AI) feeding big data and the Internet of Things (IoT), the new age of hyper-connectivity will also exponentially heighten current-day challenges; the unintended consequences of a hyper-connected, borderless world include threats such as piracy, cyber warfare and cyber-security, said Mr Leonhard.

Cue the birth of the age of "digital ethics".

"The implications of data loss or breaches will reach new heights as cyber criminals become increasingly savvy and technology begins to play an even greater role in personal enterprise, business and government," he said.

The vast movement of data will be further catapulted by high speed, cheap devices and easier access to technology.

The future of cyber security, he predicted, will lie in combining solutions and efforts to achieve an international agreement on data standards and digital ethics.

He stressed that a global treaty on ethics and security (including AI) will be essential as technology is moving from outside of us to "on top of us" to finally, "inside of us".

Mr Leonhard added that the future is about identifying and managing the balance between maintaining our human-ness in a highly automated and technologised world.

His tagline: "Embrace technology but don't become it."