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'The New Digital Age'

Posted: Sunday, August 11, 2013 1:30 am

“The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business,” by Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013, 315 pages, \$26.95 (hardcover).

“By 2025, the majority of the world’s population will, in one generation, have gone from having virtually no access to unfiltered information to accessing all of the world’s information through a device that fits in the palm of the hand,” Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen observe near the beginning of their new book, “The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business.”

“If the current pace of technological innovation is maintained, most of the projected eight billion people on Earth will be online,” they add.

Schmidt and Cohen have constructed a virtual roadmap that outlines – in a comprehensive yet surprisingly succinct way – where technology is taking us.

The good news is the authors are guardedly optimistic about what lies ahead. The bad news is after reading “The New Digital Age,” you are left with the sobering yet inevitable conclusion we really are not in Kansas anymore.

“As the quality of virtual interactions continues to improve, a range of vocations can expand the platform’s client base; you might retain a lawyer from one continent and use a realtor from another,” Schmidt and Cohen explain in “Our Future Selves,” the first chapter. “Globalization’s critics will decry this erosion of local monopolies, but it should be embraced, because this is how our societies will move forward and continue to innovate.”

“This leveling of the playing field for talent extends to the world of ideas, and innovation will increasingly come from the margins, outside traditional bastions of growth, as people begin to make new connections and apply unique perspectives to difficult problems, driving change,” they continue. “New levels of collaboration and cross-pollination across different sectors internationally will ensure that many of the best ideas and solutions will have a chance to rise to the top and be seen, considered, explored, funded, adopted and celebrated.”

Schmidt is currently the executive chairman of Google. He served as chief executive officer from 2001 to 2011. Prior to his affiliation with Google, he was chairman and CEO of Novell and chief technology officer at Sun Microsystems. Earlier in his career, he was a member of the research staff at Xerox Palo Alto Research Center as well as Bell Laboratories. He is also a trustee of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, N.J. Cohen is founder and director of Google Ideas. A Rhodes Scholar, he has written two previous books, “Children of Jihad” and “One Hundred Days of Silence.” He is a member of the National Counterterrorism Center’s Director’s Advisory Board.

As might be expected given the nature of this kind of book and the credentials of the authors, “The New Digital Age” is meticulously researched, with 38 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the seven chapters which comprise the main text. They approach their thesis from a variety of vantage points and are careful to give equal credence to ideas and perspectives that diverge from their particular bias. Obviously, whether the global community the authors describe is seen as a blessing or a curse has a lot to do with the political and cultural persuasion of the reader. Those who tend to see the rapidly-evolving interconnectedness precipitated by almost constant technological innovation as inherently good will no doubt be encouraged by the authors’ vision of the coming “Brave New World.” Those who take a more pessimistic view of the ongoing redistribution of power and wealth that is an inevitable byproduct of these sweeping changes will probably be less enthusiastic with some of their predictions about what lies in store for us in the coming decades.

In fact, chapter five, “The Future of Terrorism,” had me downright terrified.

“How serious someone considers the threat of cyber terrorism likely depends on that person’s view of hacking,” the authors explain. “Increasingly, hackers will find ways to organize themselves around common causes. They will conduct sophisticated attacks on whomever they deem a proper target and then publicize their successes widely. These groups will continue to demand attention from the governments and institutions they attack, and their threats may come to be taken more seriously than one might expect judging from today’s activities, which mostly seem like stunts.”

In the final analysis, Schmidt and Cohen are realists. They do not paint a utopian picture of the future based on the expanding growth of software and the endless array of devices that do its bidding. In contrast to many of their contemporaries who have tackled the same subject matter, they are fully aware of the potential dangers that accompany the benefits.

“What emerges in the future, and what we’ve tried to articulate, is a tale of two civilizations,” Schmidt and Cohen note in the concluding chapter. “One is physical and has developed over thousands of years, and the other is virtual and is still very much in formation. These civilizations will coexist in a more or less peaceable manner, with each restraining the negative aspects of the other.”

“The virtual and physical civilizations will affect and shape each other,” they add. “The balance they strike will come to define our world.”

I admit I have an affinity for this kind of book as I have always been fascinated with predictions about the future – especially predictions history ultimately proves roughly accurate but are often accompanied by unintended consequences. Schmidt and Cohen seem to know what they are talking about.

I highly recommend this thought-provoking collaboration.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.