

Inevitable Futures of Connectivity:

A Comparative Book Review

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The singular consistency with the future is its overarching promise of uncertainty. Possibility can be predicted and shaped, but it is nigh impossible to foretell it with absolute assurance. Yet this obstacle fails to stop futures studies from continuing to improve their knowledge and technique in navigating the uncertainty and countless alternatives ahead, requiring a rich diversity of expertise balancing an array of similar and contrasting approaches. Kevin Kelly's *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces that will Shape Our Future* analyzes the emerging future by examining the greater forces that have spurred digital change and will continue to do so for at least the next 30 years, arguing that this understanding will allow us to maximize technological benefit and prevent societal harm. Parag Khanna's *Connectography: Mapping the Future Global Civilization* addresses the issues and opportunities of connectivity as the foundation for the futures, showing how global powers will collaborate through voluntary and mutual relations that liberate themselves from historical, hegemonic modes of inequality. While Kelly and Khanna have differing methodologies to studying the future, they nonetheless share similar perspectives on cultivating a deeply interconnected world.

A significant element to compare the two books is their authors' backgrounds and methods to understanding the greater trends in the futures. Khanna, on the one hand, is a leading global strategist. He currently works as a senior researcher in the Centre on Asia and Globalisation, as well as a managing partner for a geostrategic advisory firm and a founder of a prominent content branding agency. *Connectography* is the concluding book of a trilogy regarding the future world order and the ubiquitous role to be played by connectivity. Given his professional futures background, it helps to explain the book's

reliance on scenario-building data in combination with his own analytical research of global affairs to reveal the economic and political forces driving preferred futures. Kevin Kelly, on the other hand, comes from a more technologically inclined background. In addition to co-founding *Wired* magazine in 1993, he created several other emerging technology news publications and the Hackers' Conference. Due to his technical expertise spanning from the onset of digital technology, Kelly's book is grounded in his experience regarding the broader thematic trends of technological culture. By methodology alone, Khanna's research-driven analysis promises a more scientifically relevant and supported outlook of the possible future but I do not believe the value of Kelly's insight should be discounted, especially as he does not claim to predict specific technological development.

There is a great deal to be learned from both authors' differing insights into the possible futures, each of them unveiling the forces driving the alternatives. For Khanna, the forces are political and economic in nature. He focuses specifically on the frameworks of devolution, aggregation, geopolitical competition, and infrastructure alliances. Khanna argues that capital and power is being rapidly decentralized into locally autonomous entities (e.g., cities, provinces), which are simultaneously forming large commonwealths to share their essential resources. This neoliberal transformation is allowing for increasing participation among traditionally smaller political powers, and thus fostering further competition and collaboration for all involved. Globalization has served as the engine for this shift.

Like Khanna, Kelly addresses the key forces that will propel and shape the futures. Yet his analysis attends to the technological trends rather than the political and

economic motivators. He cites twelve major forces in this case: becoming, cognifying, flowing, screening, accessing, sharing, filtering, remixing, interacting, tracking, questioning, and beginning. In vein similar to devolution and aggregation, these forces are not products but processes and ongoing trends reflective of past, present, and (possible) future. Yet at the same time, they are not supposed to reflect societal change. Rather, they represent the changes in digital technology.

Overall, the value in Kelly's work is again found in the emphasis placed on technological forces. However, I believe Kelly misses out on these forces' influence both on and from society. For example, the force of sharing in technology might in part draw from the historical, political, and economic significance of collectivism and similar ideologies. The opposite critique could be made for Khanna's research as he focuses primarily on political and economic change, and neglects for the most part of his book the potential impact of technological development. Blending the perspectives of both authors would provide a multidimensional understanding of the interplay between the different forces being explored.

This blending I have called upon between the two books is not at all an unlikely relationship, given the common messages being conveyed from their authors. The central, shared theme presented by their analyses regard the importance of connectivity. Whether it is devolution or becoming, these forces all fall under the overarching movement for increasing interconnected systems across every sphere of daily life. While Kelly imagines connectivity through evolving communications and digital technologies, Khanna envisions supply chains, megacities, and highways. Even their concluding visions of the future remain similar, despite the different conceptual frameworks. Kelly's singularity

and Khanna's borderless world both embrace a future that opens the possibilities for open access and constant improvement in the face of inequalities that the authors acknowledge are inherent to any future alternative.

Although they strongly oppose the reactionary protests against the connectivist movement, the authors do not follow a utopian or dystopian ideal. They accept that the changes happening and those to come will be fraught with opportunities and inequalities requiring vigilant address. As an information professional, both books have much to offer. It would be incredibly useful to adapt the insights from both authors to shape future libraries. Library values could easily draw from Kelly's major forces of technological change, especially since the ideals of access and sharing already resonate with them. The central theme of connectivity is just as meaningful, as it would open new relationships for libraries to build across the local and the global levels. Understanding the lessons to be learned from these books, libraries and the information professions are key to directing the preferred future of an increasingly borderless and interconnected information culture.

## References

- Kelly, K. (2016). *The inevitable: Understanding the 12 technological forces that will shape our future*. New York: Viking.
- Khanna, P. (2016). *Connectography: Mapping the future global civilization*. New York: Random House.