

Embrace don't fear the future, 'futurist' tells Dubai audience

'The future of the world is better than you think but, and this is a big but, we actually have to do something to make it stay positive,' said Gerd Leonhard.



Futurist Gerd Leonhard speaking during the SubOptic 2016 conference in Dubai. Pawan Singh / The National

DUBAI // Despite rapid transformations in the way humans live, the future should be embraced and not feared, said Gerd Leonhard, author and self-described futurist.

Through emerging technologies such as cloud computing and “the Internet of Things”, in the next five years Mr Leonhard said 75 per cent of “the whole world” will be connected.

“There’s many great things about this, and there’s many challenges about this,” he said.

“There are predictions saying that 80 per cent of the military budget in 10 years will be spent on data cloud, cyber issues. Basically, the war moves to the cloud.

“Our world is going to change more in the next 20 years than the previous 300 years.”

This week, he addressed attendees at the SubOptic 2016 conference — an event for the submarine fibre-optic cable industry — and touched upon issues that will affect the entire internet’s infrastructure, such as bandwidth and access.

Mr Leonhard, a Swiss national and native German speaker, recounted an experience in Japan earlier this month where he used a mobile app to talk about fish with a Japanese-speaking sushi chef for 30 minutes.

What made his conversation possible, and what will be central to the continuing change he describes, is connectivity and the role of the internet in nearly every aspect of our daily lives, he said.

Language translation, as he illustrated through his sushi restaurant anecdote, as well as things such as artificial intelligence and self-driving cars, are all emerging technologies being built around connectivity.

Due to interconnectivity and associated technologies, by 2030, he said roughly 40 to 60 per cent of all jobs will be completed by machines. Jobs such as mopping airport floors, preparing cappuccinos and even financial advice.

Areas such as finance, real estate, medicine, energy and food are still to be “disrupted” in the way other industries, such as media, telecommunications and transportation, have in recent years, he said.

Associated challenges that will continue to emerge will revolve around ethics, establishing limits on how humans approach issues such as artificial intelligence and human genome editing, capabilities and control over the internet’s infrastructure and cyber security.

“Watching the media or watching movies about the future, there’s always one thing that comes up - that we’re all going to die because the robots will take over the world. If you look at all of the movies that come out of Hollywood, it’s this fear,” he said.

“The future of the world is better than you think but, and this is a big but, we actually have to do something to make it stay positive.”

Mr Leonhard, is an author, speaker and fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts in London.

“As a futurist, I don’t do predictions, I will not tell you what the future holds so you can buy stocks or not buy stocks or those kinds of things; I basically give you observations,” he said.

“The future is coming so fast that it’s important to have insights and foresights.”