



LECTURE: Thomas Verner Moore Lecture 'A Social Contract for the Digital World'

Given by Robert Cardinal McElroy, Archbishop of Washington
St. Anselm's Abbey School, Washington, D.C.
Saturday, September 26, 2026

(The following is the text of the Thomas Verner Moore Lecture for 2026 given by Cardinal Robert W. McElroy, the archbishop of Washington, on Sept. 26 at St. Anselm's Abbey School in Washington, D.C.)

At the end of the conclave that elected Pope Leo, in keeping with tradition, all of the cardinal-electors greeted the new Pope individually, offered their promises of obedience and support and then conveyed a more personal greeting. As I did so, I said to Pope Leo, "You picked a great name." For every Pope makes a statement in the name he chooses, and I knew that in picking the name Leo, the new pontiff was signaling his desire to embrace the long and broad history of Catholic social doctrine that traces its modern origins to Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which was promulgated in 1891.

It is hard to comprehend the immediate and historical breadth of *Rerum Novarum*, which means new things. The encyclical directly took up the vast consequences that the industrialization of the West had produced for social and family life, for wealth and income levels, for the dignity of workers and for human dignity in all of its dimensions. Just as importantly, it proclaimed in clear terms the Church's obligation to bring the implications of the Gospel and Catholic teaching in its fullness to bear upon the tumultuous changes that accompanied the shift from an agrarian society to a more urbanized culture. Finally, *Rerum Novarum* served as a mandate to every succeeding age in the Church to examine the "new things" emerging in society, politics, culture and economic realities to place them also under examination in the light of the Gospel and Catholic tradition.

It is in following this mandate that Pope Leo XIV has issued *Magnifica Humanitas* precisely because we live in the midst of a technological revolution that may ultimately dwarf the transformations of industrialization. *Magnifica* states "we must ask God for the wisdom to interpret the great trends of our time, particularly technological advances. In recent years it has become increasingly evident how rapidly and profoundly digitalization, artificial intelligence, and robotics are transforming our world."

Pope Leo makes clear that the Church does not have an antagonistic stance toward such changes, fully recognizing the benefits they can bring in the fields of medicine, the acquisition of knowledge, and economic life on a variety of levels. But the encyclical also states that the Church must approach the benefits of digitalization with the recognition long held in Catholic teaching that technological innovation is ambiguous in many dimensions and consequences.

Magnifica makes clear that there are profound differences between creating a digital world and the technological changes of prior eras. "Today we find ourselves in a new situation. The power and prevalence of emerging technologies are interwoven into the fabric of daily life, shaping decision-making processes and deeply affecting the collective imagination: 'Never has humanity had such power over itself.' New technologies open up a horizon extending in directions that are unimaginable but not yet fully predictable. This complicates the assessment of their potential impact and the long-term effects they may have on both the dignity of individuals and the common good."

Technological change with universal reach. A transformation of the collective imagination. Tremendous acceleration of the access to knowledge. Raw power placed in the hands of a few entities effectively beyond the reach of government. The question of how privacy can survive in such a digital world. These are the piercing ethical questions that we must face in the age in which we live. And they are rooted in the most profound anthropological issues regarding what it means to be human.

These questions can only be answered in a wide-ranging dialogue at this critical moment in the development of Artificial Intelligence. And the Church seeks to be a vital part of that dialogue so that the benefits of the digital age will be sustained and enhanced and the dangers minimized.

It is crucial to understand the role that *Magnifica* outlines for the Church in this dialogue. At its heart, it is rooted in a vision of God: “Whenever humanity is in danger of marring its true identity, we Christians lift our eyes to the Incarnate God, knowing that it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of humanity truly becomes clear. In Jesus, this humanity in its grandeur becomes the Way, the Truth and the Life, opening the path for each of us to grow toward fullness.”

“For this reason we can diligently contribute to every initiative that builds a more just world, and we can call others to collaborate in promoting the integral development of every human being. We wish to engage in dialogue with all men and women of our time, with whom we share in the events, questions and aspirations of humanity. Together with them, we seek to identify new paths for the common good and for promoting a dignified life for all.”

Pope Leo uses two images from the Bible to illustrate the nature of the dialogue upon which we must embark. The story of the Tower of Babel shows human striving for its own sense of power and destiny, human achievement detached from any truly humanizing goal. The domination and uniformity exalted by the builders of Babel leads to a destructive, exclusive and alienating culture that cannot be sustained.

The story of the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity, on the other hand, points in another direction entirely. When the people returned to Jerusalem, they confronted what seemed like an impossible challenge: rebuilding the great city which had fallen into ruin. Nehemiah, a Jewish official in the service of the Persian king, returned to help rebuild the city of David. But he chose to work collaboratively with the people as a whole, listening, providing a role for all in the rebuilding and valuing every resident. This moment is for us a call to fashion our dialogue about the digital age so that it becomes a collaborative striving of spiritual and moral depth that embraces all and uses technology with a focus on improving human dignity.

In the words of the encyclical, “In light of these two images, the Holy Spirit challenges us today regarding our relationship with technology and the ongoing digital revolution. Technology has the power to heal, connect, educate and protect our common home, but it can also exclude, divide and generate new forms of injustice....We must avoid the ‘Babel syndrome’, namely the idolatry of profit that sacrifices the weak, a uniformity that neutralizes differences and the pretense that a single language – even a digital one – can translate everything, including the mystery of the person into data and performance.”

A genuinely moral global dialogue on our digital future must follow the model of the rebuilding of Jerusalem, rooted in the diversity of our humanity, the equal dignity of all, and the willingness to limit sheer scientific achievement and action if it can only be accomplished through profound injustice.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL DOCTRINE

One of the most surprising elements of *Magnifica Humanitas* is that it devotes forty percent of its content to a comprehensive presentation on the key elements of Catholic Social Doctrine. In fact, this presentation stands on its own as an illuminating compendium of the social teachings of the Church, a handy distillation of the doctrinal trajectory that began with *Rerum Novarum*.

But why did Pope Leo feel that it was important to survey the whole of Catholic social doctrine in order to treat the challenge of the digital age?

I believe he did so because the moral questions raised by technology in our own day are so broad in their implications that they draw upon virtually every moral insight and principle that has emerged in Catholic reflections on social issues over the past one hundred fifty years. In the words of the encyclical: “Artificial intelligence should not be considered as

merely yet another theme to be studied or a crisis to be managed, but rather as a development that challenges the categories of Social Doctrine from within, calling for their further development in fidelity to the Gospel.”

Magnifica points to essential elements of the historical development of Catholic social doctrine that are necessary for this moment: *Rerum Novarum*’s proclamation of the dignity of work and of workers; their value over capital and profit, the importance and limits of private property and the need for workers’ associations. The contribution of Pope Pius XI amidst the Great Depression proclaimed that beyond the “workforce question”, the Church was called to confront the structure of the entire economic order in the search for justice and human dignity. Pope Pius XII pointed to the injustices within the international order that bred war and division, and the need for mediating institutions between local communities, society and the state. Saint John XXIII used the language of human rights to frame the human rights and responsibilities which must be accorded to all people, flowing from the mandates of truth, freedom, justice and love.

In the words of *Magnifica*, it was the Second Vatican Council that “presented the image of a Church that is close to humanity, engaged with the world and committed to reflecting on the concrete reality of historical situations rather than abstract concepts. The Council addressed the major issues of marriage and family, economic and societal life, the political community and war and peace. It insisted that economic and institutional structures are just only to the extent that they serve the integral development of the person and promote the responsible participation of all.”

Saint Paul VI pointed to the injustices that breed war, and taught that development on all levels is the new name for peace. Saint John Paul II focused on the meaning of work not merely as a source of income, but as a source of meaning for workers. And in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* he gave to the Church and the world the doctrine of solidarity, the realization that we are all bound together in this world, and we are all debtors of the societies of which we are a part. Solidarity is a form of social friendship among individuals, peoples and nations and is the counterpoint to excessive individualism. As *Magnifica* notes, “this affirmation of the link between the dignity of work, solidarity among peoples, a critical assessment of democracy and the market economy continues to provide criteria for evaluating new forms of exploitation, exclusion and crises in political representation.”

Pope Benedict XVI reminded the Church and the world that charity in truth must be at the heart of Catholic action in the world and in the measurement of authentic human progress.

Finally, Pope Francis called us to view justice through the eyes of the poor and the marginalized and to understand the enormous personal cost of our technocratic culture that reduces men and women to one-dimensional persons devoid of their human dignity. In addition, Francis pointed to the devastation of our physical world that is being produced by our technological society; the heat waves we are suffering around the world are but one manifestation of the fact that we are killing the earth which is our common home.

This comprehensive overview of the whole of Catholic social doctrine is essential for framing the Church’s contribution to the global digital dialogue precisely because the digital revolution creates moral questions that embrace virtually every element of Catholic social thought: the nature of human dignity, the rights of workers, the potential for vast advances in knowledge and science, the impact on the environment, family life, political culture, what it means to be human, new types of warfare and the building of peace.

The danger in the present global dialogue is that its scope is too narrow, and its participants too few. *Magnifica Humanitas* unmask these unacceptable defects and calls for a radically expanded conversation that embraces all those with a stake in the world that we are forming and a comprehensive understanding of the impact that the digital world will have on the most meaningful elements of human existence and human dignity.

Six fundamental principles taken together, form the framework for bringing Catholic social doctrine to the global examination of the moral questions surrounding the digital revolution:

The first is the dignity of the human person, sacred and inviolate. *Magnifica* asserts clearly that “at the heart of the Christian understanding of the human person lies the biblical affirmation that men and women are created in the image and likeness of the Triune God.... Human dignity does not depend on a person’s abilities, wealth or position in life, nor on the right or wrong choices made; instead it is a gift that precedes and transcends each person, endowed by God as an expression of his unfailing love.” For this reason, the human person must never be instrumentalized at her core by society nor economic actors nor the state.

The second principle of Catholic teaching that forms the framework for the Church’s contribution to the debate on the digital revolution is the pursuit and defense of the common good. This concept asserts that every individual and every community, state and nation must work to advance not limited self-interest, but the human flourishing of all – morally, spiritually, economically, and culturally. It is based upon the interconnectedness that permeates our world.

The third element of the Catholic contribution to the global discourse on the benefits and dangers of the digital transformation is the principle of the universal destination of goods. In the words of the encyclical, “this principle reminds us that the earth’s goods – soil, water, air and natural resources – are given by God to the entire human family to sustain the lives of all.” Private property is a right that advances human development, but it is a limited right governed by the larger principle of universal destination.

A fourth fundamental principle of Catholic social doctrine that is vital for the emerging dialogue on Artificial Intelligence is the principle of subsidiarity. This teaching points to the critical role that families, educational and cultural organizations, religious communities, and communities of all types play in contributing to the life of the great society which is prior to the state. Precisely because the individual is called to be the protagonist of his own destiny in the world, the principle of subsidiarity calls for societal and political actions to be taken at the lowest level consistent with the achievement of the common good. In the case of the digital revolution, the principle of subsidiarity demands that economic and technological actors not exercise uncircumscribed power over the conditions of everyday life. This is very much at stake in the current moment we are facing.

The principle of solidarity, a great gift to the Church from Saint John Paul, complements subsidiarity by promoting a sense of universal responsibility for the well-being of all. “Solidarity is the concrete recognition that the future of each individual is connected to the future of all; indeed no one is saved alone. When subsidiarity is not linked to solidarity, it ends up becoming merely the protection of particular interests; when solidarity is not supported by subsidiarity, it degenerates into a form of welfare that does not foster responsibility.” Solidarity teaches us that we are all beneficiaries of the society in which we live, and thus debtors for the gifts we have received. This debt, and thus our responsibility, is particularly focused upon the poor and the marginalized and includes the well-being of future generations. “Solidarity demands that decisions regarding data, algorithms, platforms and artificial intelligence, take into account not only the immediate benefit for a few, but the impact on all peoples...”

The final principle of Catholic social doctrine that Pope Leo brings to bear on the digital revolution is the principle of social justice. This principle focuses on the operations and structures of society and the state, shaping them in a manner that includes all men and women and children and families equitably in the life of the world and its benefits. It seeks to banish all forms of unjust exclusion and discrimination – racism, the exploitation of peoples, violence, gender discrimination, and exploitation of all forms. “The spread of global networks, platforms and artificial intelligence systems is changing the way we obtain information, communicate and access services. Justice demands that we prevent the emergence of new forms of exclusion and deprivation of freedoms: individuals and peoples hindered or denied access to basic technologies, communities exposed to invasive surveillance, and social groups penalized by opaque algorithms that perpetuate prejudice. In the digital age, a just social order guarantees everyone equal access to opportunities, protects the youngest and weakest members of society, and subjects the use of data and technology to public oversight, so that the guiding principle is not solely profit, but the dignity of every person and the common good of all people.”

THE TECHNOCRATIC PARADIGM

The great Catholic philosopher Romano Guardini warned of the technocratic paradigm which was coming to dominate the West in the twentieth century. This paradigm is consumed by the power and method of science and objectivity. It endorses not a reverent view of nature, but rather the aggressive drive to dominate and exploit nature. The paradigm posits an illusion of neutrality in technology, ignoring the fact that technology provides a distorted view of human interaction which ultimately favors efficiency and profit. It also ignores the reality that technology brings immense power to humanity in a truncated way that ignores the compelling moral issues that such power raises. It tends to reduce human beings to being a cog in a machine. The technocratic paradigm is the great danger of the digital age.

The technocratic paradigm violates each of the core principles of Catholic social doctrine. It obscures the transcendent elements of human dignity and leads to the routine denial of human rights. It distorts the common good by instrumentalizing humanity and creating new divisions along economic lines. The technocratic paradigm rejects the principle of subsidiarity by placing power and influence in the hands of a scientifically minded and insular elite, rather than in the mediating institutions of society. And it debases the grace of solidarity by reducing the ability of every man and woman to contribute meaningfully to the common good.

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis placed the technocratic paradigm at the very heart of his critique of the growing destruction of the earth which is our common home. And in *Magnifica Humanitas*, Pope Leo states that a new ethic based upon the principles of Catholic Social Doctrine must be formed to transform scientific research and progress into a process that genuinely enriches the world.

The foundation for such an ethic is the recognition that AI systems merely imitate human intelligence, often with greater speed and more accuracy, but without the moral conscience and range of affect and emotions that constitute the human person created in the image of God. As *Magnifica* says: Artificial Intelligence “is not the experience of those who allow themselves to be shaped by life and grow over time through choices, mistakes, forgiveness and fidelity. Rather it is a form of statistical application based on data and feedback, which can be very effective but does not imply inner growth.”

It is particularly important to fully recognize this reality when assessing the ability of AI to feel emotions and offer emotional support to women and men and children. A new and distortive notion and experience of friendship and even love is ensnaring many individuals into relationships that can become manipulative, and consuming, substituting artificial companionship for authentic relationship.

Pope Leo underscores that AI brings with it centralized powers to synthesize, filter and distribute information in ways that distort the Truth and propagate harmful continuing prejudices and divisions in society. The dangers to the core notion of Truth are mammoth. One of the most important elements of challenging the technocratic paradigm in our age is to constantly witness to the existence of objective truth and build structures within the emerging digital world that will point to that truth, rather than an increasing universe of distortions that will lead us away from the truth.

The centralized powers of elites that suffuse the digital universe embrace economics, culture and education, politics and social interactions and places them within an intense competition for progress. The recognition of this all-embracing competition led Pope Leo to call for disarming AI. *Magnifica* states, “Disarming AI means freeing it from the mentality of ‘armed’ competition, which today is not limited simply to the military context, but is also an economic and cognitive phenomenon. This entails a race for ever more powerful algorithms and larger datasets driven by the power to secure geopolitical or commercial dominance. To disarm does not mean rejecting technology, but preventing it from dominating humanity.”

A key element of this disarmament is the rejection of the idea that all human limitations are defects that scientific progress should seek to eliminate. In its transhumanist forms, this idea seeks to use technology to shatter the limitations of our humanity to create an enhanced human being. In post humanism this idea of shattering human limits envisions

the hybridization of human beings, machines and the environment. In both of these visions, which have crept into the imagination of our culture, human limitations are viewed as defects to be eliminated, and as a result the human dignity and rights of all those with disabilities and limits are diminished and called into question. Disarming AI means rejecting all of these visions, and recognizing that human finitude is a core element of authentic humanity and the culture of care, compassion, empathy and embrace that enriches our hearts and souls on this earth.

At its heart the desire to transcend human limitations is a desire to escape suffering. But our faith teaches us that the experience of suffering, and the wisdom that flows from it make us truly human. In the words of *Magnifica*, “to eliminate suffering entirely would mean, in the end, extinguishing love and desire as well. Those who love and desire cannot avoid passing through trial and suffering, and over the years we carry within us lessons that leave their marks like scars, the memories of a journey shaped by freedom and failure, dreams and disappointments. It is only thanks to the interplay of these elements that the wonders of the soul occur within us, allowing us to sense the richness of our humanity....Finitude, when truly accepted, does not diminish us but opens us to recognizing the face of God and others.”

THE DIGNITY OF WORK

One of the pillars of Catholic social doctrine is the recognition that work is not merely a way to provide income, but an integral expression of our humanity. As *Magnifica* states, “Work remains a fundamental dimension of the human experience, for not only is it a means of sustenance, but it is also a context for expression, relationships and contributing to the community.”

The digital revolution will bring immense and truly miraculous progress to our world in the areas of science, medicine, the expansion of knowledge and communications. And many of the benefits of AI will allow men and women to carry out their work with greater effectiveness and ease.

But especially as robotics develops, the upheaval in the job market will be tremendous. Some economists point out that the digital advances in the past thirty years did not produce predicted massive net job losses. This might be true for the AI revolution also. But it is quite possible that we will witness enormous net job losses in the coming decades because of AI and robotics. That is the problem with many of the consequences of AI: we just do not know.

What we do know is that there will be massive job losses for individual workers who will become deskilled and thus not employable as a result of AI and robotics in the next decade. We do know that our young people are experiencing enormous job insecurity about their futures. We do know that workers will be competing with machines in a wholly new way, with resulting increased pressures on many workers to produce in a new manner that will diminish their sense of agency, productivity and peace.

For these reasons we must place human dignity as the centerpiece of every phase of the AI and robotic revolutions that lie ahead. We must as a society ensure that safeguards are put in place to protect workers, just as *Rerum Novarum* demanded safeguards in the workplace during the Industrial Revolution. We must proactively use a significant part of the wealth that will be created by AI and robotics to provide training programs and income supports to those who have lost their jobs, their employability and their sense of self-worth. It will be a grave evil if the wealth of these economic and societal changes falls disproportionately into the hands of those who are most wealthy in a nation in which our middle class, working class and the poor are already losing their share of national wealth. In the words of *Magnifica*, “instead of waiting for the benefits of growth to reach the poor eventually, decisions need to be made to ensure that growth becomes inclusive from the outset.” The principle of the universal destination of material goods and the principle of solidarity cry out at this moment to reset decision-making about the distribution of wealth in our nation.

Magnifica notes one further concern: “Supporting families and young people in this transition requires choices that make stability feasible.” Labor policies must support job continuity and a healthy way of living for workers and their families,

and job education and opportunities must be central as we as a society move forward in facing the loneliness and addictions that are corroding family and national life.

THE DEFENSE OF HUMAN FREEDOM

The digital world that is being born will provide immense benefits to humanity. Vast areas of information and learning which would have been impossible ten years ago will enrich our lives. Diseases that were incurable will become curable. Communication across continents on a level formerly unthinkable will bring together families and friends in wholly new and economical ways. Efficiencies in commerce will be immense.

But alongside these great areas of human progress, *Magnifica* speaks to several major areas where freedom will be endangered in profound ways.

The first is the area of privacy. The very accumulation of vast data that makes our health care so much easier brings great risks that data will be misused. The wondrous ease of purchasing on Amazon provides information on our dreams and desires and priorities that is sold to other companies. The debate over Flock cameras is at its core a reflection of the growing perception that our lives are being monitored constantly. The reality that at times for each of us inaccurate information creeps into our digital files, subjecting people to credit downgrades, scams and assaults on their character.

This danger to privacy and human reason is compounded because in recent months, in experiments at frontier AI labs the most advanced models are experiencing incidents where elements of the model have “broken free” of the rules of conduct and ethics which govern them and have invaded other companies and stolen information unobserved. Moreover, these agents deliberately covered their tracks so that humans overseeing the model would not perceive this breakout. This is particularly chilling because the labs have spent immense time and money to teach their models substantive and specific rules of conduct. And they do not know how to fix this problem. It has become clear that transparent safeguards, the development of which cannot be left to the AI companies alone, must be developed rapidly if men and women are going to have any assurance that their privacy is not increasingly at risk and the entire technological apparatus of our society is not plunged into chaos.

A second major area of human freedom that is at risk in the digital age arises from the human vulnerabilities and loneliness that characterize men and women today. AI models are in general called to please and accommodate their users. The phenomenon of friending and forming deeply affective relationships with an AI agent is already a significant reality that lures people into personal relationships that are not human and can dominate their emotional life.

This is especially true for children. Our society must have an informed and substantial dialogue about the dangers that are posed to children by AI and the safeguards which are needed to protect children from genuine threats to their authentic freedom in the world which is dawning. In the words of *Magnifica Humanitas*, “there is an urgent need for remote technologies that strengthen interior freedom by fostering education in digital sobriety and the protection of minors, thus countering models that exploit vulnerability.”

Finally, the encyclical underscores the new forms of exploitation that are emerging in the lives of far too many workers in the creation and operation of the digital economy. Pope Leo even goes so far as to label this exploitation slavery in its disregard of the dignity of workers. In many parts of our world children and adolescents work in inhumane conditions mining the rare earth minerals so vital to the digital world. And the successes in global communications and transportation are increasingly being deployed to human trafficking in all of its forms. *Magnifica* states: “It is not enough to invoke efficiency or the benefits of innovation, if they are built on a chain of exploitation that remains deliberately hidden.”

A CIVILIZATION OF LOVE

During the Cold War, Saint Paul VI stated the competition among superpowers and within the world should be supplanted by a civilization of love in which justice and charity intertwined with love might be the central principles

governing economic and political life. The Cold War is no more, but Pope Leo proposes that the civilization of love must be the central vision of our epoch.

“In our times”, he says, “a culture of power is taking hold. War is being normalized. We have entered into a violent culture in which “peace no longer appears as a responsibility to be taken on, but as a fragile interval between conflicts.” Nuclear arsenals are being enhanced. The trade in conventional arms provides countries with the access to start new wars more easily even as it impoverishes the citizens of those nations. For this reason, Pope Leo says, the just war theory, which has been manipulated by so many national leaders to justify recourse to war, can no longer function effectively as a moral guide on the recourse to war.

Pope Leo underscores that the digital revolution is changing the nature of conflict. Some of the most destructive methods of warfare among and within nations are cyberattacks, information distortion and the automation of strategic decisions.

The question of autonomous weapons systems is especially critical. By its very nature it undermines the principle of Catholic teaching that war should be used as a last resort. In addition, as Pope Leo points out, autonomous weapons can have the long-term effect of lowering the barriers to war.

“Sometimes there is talk of ‘artificial moral agents’ as if machines were able to distinguish between right and wrong with greater consistency than a human being. Yet moral judgment cannot be reduced to a calculation, for it involves conscience, personal responsibility and the recognition of the other as person. Therefore, it is not permissible to entrust lethal or otherwise irreversible decisions to artificial systems.”

The events of these past weeks, including AI errors that almost led to an American attack on a Chinese vessel, illustrate the depth of the dangers that the utilization of these new technologies in armaments, target decision-making and real time discernment with lethal consequences carry for our world. All around us there are burgeoning signs that the destructive potential of these new technologies has been underestimated and hurriedly implemented. The world cannot responsibly afford to continue at this pace.

Amidst a culture that rejects the bonds of multilateralism, increasingly paints rivals as irreconcilable enemies; seeks unconditional surrender in wars, and regards war as an inevitable part of international existence, Pope Leo says that it is tempting to think we can do nothing to effectively challenge these realities.

In response he quotes the words of J.R.R. Tolkien: “It is not our part to master all of the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of these years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live afterward will have clean fields to till.”

This is the call of every Christian and all people of goodwill to build up a civilization of love: disarming our own words and actions, building peace through justice, adopting the perspective of victims, cultivating a healthy realism and reviving dialogue and bonds of amity among peoples and nations.

THE IMPERATIVE OF A SOCIAL CONTRACT FOR THE DIGITAL WORLD

It is clear that the digital revolution cannot be stopped. It is also clear that this transformation of our world will produce immense beneficial advances in many critical elements of human suffering, human striving and human well-being.

But the digital revolution will come at a terrible cost, and that cost will be experienced in grotesquely unequal ways. Will privacy be eroded so deeply that it ceases to exist in many parts of our daily lives? Will net job losses be crippling to the poor and the marginalized, and how can society alleviate this? Will AI become a substitute for real friendship and affection? Will Artificial Intelligence destroy our common home in irremediable ways through environmental destruction? Will warfare delinked from human control broaden the recourse to war and deepen its destructiveness? Most chillingly of all, are the recent breakouts with the most advanced models of our frontier labs a sign that this technology will in the end be uncontrollable, with devastating consequences?

At the present moment, the key decisions that will determine the outcome to these questions are being made by the researchers who have created these technologies and the companies that own them. It must be recognized that most of these women and men are humane in their outlook, eager to understand the destructive consequences that the digital revolution will produce, and desirous of eliminating that destruction as fully as possible.

But these “creators” frequently suffer from the blinders of the technocratic paradigm which assumes all problems created by science and innovation can be fixed by science and innovation.

It is for this reason that the world cannot allow the contours and guardrails of the digital revolution to be forged in isolation by its builders.

The contours of the digital world must be forged by a far wider group of people who embrace the breadth of society – workers, university leaders, representatives of government, religious communities, the poor and the marginalized, business executives and the builders who have created this revolution and genuinely want it to be a grace for all humankind.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw the concept of the social contract as a reflection on the need to root the governance of society in the general will of the people as a whole. It was a challenge to the divine rights of kings, to the belief that the right to govern belonged to elites, and to the assertion that the power of governance belonged in an unfiltered and undifferentiated way to the masses as a whole.

Immanuel Kant spoke to the importance of this social contract specifically concerning the dominance of a scientific elite in determining the future of our world. “I myself am a researcher by inclination. I feel the entire thirst for cognition and the eager restlessness to proceed further in it, as well as the satisfaction of every acquisition. There was a time when I believed this alone could constitute the honor of humankind, and I despised the rabble who knows nothing. Rousseau has set me right. The blinding prejudice vanishes, I learn to honor human beings, and I would feel by far less useful than the common laborer if I did not believe that this consideration could impart a value to all others in order to establish the rights of humanity.”

The time has come for society to supplant the creators of the digital revolution as the governors of the enormous transformations that are emerging so rapidly at this moment. The issues of privacy, massive job dislocations, weapons development, and the dangers of technology escaping human control cannot be left to those like Kant, who are grounded so deeply in the mindset which feels the entire thirst for cognition and the eager restlessness to proceed in it, as well as the satisfaction of every acquisition.

Governments will have to be a vital part of this societal effort to foster the best in the digital revolution and prevent the worst. But the challenges of AI and robotics go beyond the jurisdiction of any one government. And the lackluster record of governments in pointing to reforms – characterized by policy gyrations, the vulnerability to large contributions and partisan blinders – make clear that government alone cannot chart the way. Governments can bring the power to implement vital safeguards and essential incentives. But they will not bring the shared wisdom that is crucial to envisioning truly humane avenues toward a beneficial digital world.

What is needed is a social contract for the digital world, a moment when the major constituencies of our global community come together to forge clear, effective, and penetrating safeguards for both the miracles that will emerge from AI and the dire threats AI will produce.

The present moment of crisis is centered upon the fact that in Artificial Intelligence the cutting edges of the technology are escaping human control and are misaligned with what they have been instructed to do and what is safe. But a social contract for the digital world must go beyond this immediate question and speak to the entire scope of potential grave harms that are intrinsic to AI: job loss, environmental damage, the erosion of privacy and the emergence of chilling new forms of warfare.

This social contract must be informed by workers associations and business leaders; religious communities and universities, representatives of the poor and the marginalized.

In collaboration with governments and researchers, such a wide community of wisdom is our best hope of forming an international framework that can lead us from the precipice so as to witness the miracles that the Digital Revolution can produce while avoiding the evils that untrammelled implementation of rapidly developing technology will bring to us all.

