

# Imagining THE Digital Future

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CENTER

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

February 29, 2024

### The Impact of Artificial Intelligence by 2040

[\[Read the full report here\]](#)

Elon University's Imagining the Digital Future Center conducted a two-pronged study in late 2023 to develop an outlook for the impact of artificial intelligence on individuals and societal systems by 2040. Research findings were gathered using two methodologies: a [national public opinion survey](#) and a [canvassing of hundreds of global technology experts](#).

A large share of both the public and the experts expressed concerns about how disruptive AI will be to essential dimensions of life: the future of privacy, wealth inequalities, politics and elections, employment opportunities, the level of civility in society and personal relationships with others. At the same time, they expressed hopes about AI applications making life easier, more efficient and safer in many important respects. There was wide agreement that now is a pivotal moment for AI and humans.

#### National Public Opinion Poll

Two-thirds of the Americans polled expect AI to have a negative impact on personal privacy, and more than half expect negative consequences in regard to employment opportunities. More than half surveyed expect AI to have negative impacts on politics and elections, and 40% said they fear a worsening of the level of civility in society due to AI impact. They indicate that the most positive outlook is for AI-inspired improvements in healthcare systems and the quality of medical treatment.

[See detailed national public opinion poll findings](#)

#### The Center's 17<sup>th</sup> "Future of Digital Life" Canvassing of Experts

More than 300 technology developers, business and policy leaders, researchers and analysts responded to a battery of questions about the likely impact of AI by 2040. Among the hundreds of future visions: amplified "knowledge" will lead to the Mind<sup>2</sup>; AI will diminish human agency, empowering those who develop it; AI-borne mis- and disinformation continually rewrites definitions of "the truth"; economies/work and health/medicine are overhauled in a way that makes life better for most people. The following themes reflect the most-often expressed insights found among these experts' responses:

**Theme 1 – We will have to reimagine what it means to be human:** As AI tools integrate into most aspects of life, some experts predict the very definition of a "human," "person" or "individual" will change.

**Theme 2 – Societies must restructure, reinvent or replace entrenched systems:** These experts urge that societies fundamentally change long-established institutions and systems. They argued for a more equitable distribution of wealth and power and said the spread of AI requires new multistakeholder governance from diverse sectors of society.

**Theme 3 – Humanity could be greatly enfeebled by AI:** Some experts are concerned that uses of AI could diminish human agency and skills. Some worry it will nearly eliminate critical thinking, reading and decision-making abilities and healthy, in-person connectedness, and lead to more mental health problems. Some fear the impact of mass unemployment on people's psyches and behaviors.

**Theme 4 – Don't fear the tech; people are the problem and the solution:** A large share of these experts say their first concern isn't that AI will "go rogue." They mostly worry that advanced AI may magnify dangers already evident today due to people's uses and abuses of digital tools. They fear a rise in problems tied to extractive capitalism, menacing and manipulative tactics exercised by bad actors, and autocratic governments' violations of human rights.

**Theme 5 – Key benefits from AI will arise:** Many experts described likely gains to be seen as AI diffuses through society. They expect that most people will enjoy and benefit from AI's assistance, especially in education, business, research and medicine/health. They expect it will boost innovation and reconfigure and liberate people's use of time.

[Explore the full Experts report, read insightful essays](#)