

'Innovation' Is Everywhere, But What Does It Mean?

Two of its leading prophets, Richard Florida and Ray Kurzweil, to give their definition at Oct. 22 event.

By [Geoff Dembicki](#), 27 Sep 2014, TheTyee.ca



Quick, you have 20 seconds to define "innovation." But let's set some ground rules. Your definition can't include the terms cutting edge, disruptive, outside-the-box, paradigm shift, reinvention, optimization, actualize, creativity, iteration or the knowledge economy. And you can't namedrop Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk or anyone even remotely tied to Silicon Valley. In our age of startups and TED Talks, "innovation" is ubiquitous. Yet few people actually know what it means.

If anyone can define "innovation", though, it's Richard Florida and Ray Kurzweil, two of its leading prophets, who'll speak in Vancouver Oct. 22 at an event hosted by SFU Public Square, Vancity and the Vancouver Foundation. (Click [here](#) for more information and to purchase tickets). Florida is author of *The Rise of The Creative Class*, which in 2002 predicted our shift to an economy led by hip, educated urbanites. Kurzweil, a famed inventor and artificial intelligence theorist, was among the first to foresee the Internet's rise and is a director of engineering at Google.

We are living in their world. Cities now compete to attract a transglobal cohort of iconoclast professionals, while the hourly techno-progress to which [we're becoming immunized](#) makes an age of self-driving cars and "intelligent" machines feel imminent. Innovation promises to free us from limits imposed by history, Mother Nature and even death. No wonder [we worship it](#) in these uncertain times. Yet our inability to define its meaning has societal consequences. It could be making us less free.

A creative economy?

All ideologies make claims about human nature. Florida argues each of us is born creative. "Every human being is innately endowed with the ability to combine and recombine data, perceptions, materials and ideas, and devise new ways of thinking and doing," he [writes](#). Schools and institutions may rob us of that endowment, he argues, but dense and diverse cities grow it larger. When creative people cluster in such cities they generate the economic growth needed to prosper in our post-industrial era.

That's been Florida's argument for the past dozen or so years. See echoes of it in the revitalization of downtown cores across North America; in the [prevalence](#) of the word "creative" on LinkedIn profiles; in the one-third of North Americans now belonging to the "creative class"; in the cultural ascension of TED Talks; in Mayor Gregor Robertson's desire to grow Vancouver into a thriving tech hub. "Richard Florida," [according to one testimony](#) on his website, "has had an impact on every city in the world."

What's the nature of this impact? Last year Harper's columnist Thomas Frank [pointed out](#) what most of Florida's disciples overlook, that the institutions making creative life possible, "chiefly newspapers, magazines, universities and record labels," are "entering a period of disastrous decline." Florida's advice to creatives is to think more like entrepreneurs. "Do what you love but find out how to make it economically viable," he [says](#). "If they call that selling out then go ahead and do it."

No more limits

While Florida repositioned "innovation" -- and the urban revitalization necessary to produce it -- as the most important currency of our post-industrial economy, Kurzweil has tried to prepare us psychologically for the vertigo of a world without limits. "In about 40 years," the famed A.I. theorist and inventor [predicts](#), "the pace of change is going to be so astonishingly quick that you won't be able to follow it unless you enhance your own intelligence by merging with the intelligent technology we are creating."

Kurzweil has built his reputation on bold predictions. In 1990, he was among the first to foresee the Internet's vast cultural reach. He also invented technology enabling its rise: the flatbed scanner, which digitizes printed materials, and the software making them searchable. Kurzweil is now [working for Google](#) on a search engine so smart "you would interact with it like you would a human assistant." He [thinks](#) we're "only 15 years away from a tipping point in longevity" that makes death obsolete.

Kurzweil's forecasts are [often wrong](#). (In 2005, for instance, he said computers would disappear within five years.) The conviction behind them, though, that no established fact -- not even death -- is safe from disruption, is among our era's overarching narratives. Disruption promises a world without limits. But in reality "it's a theory of history founded on a profound anxiety about financial collapse," The New Yorker's Jill Lepore [has argued](#), and "an apocalyptic fear of global devastation."

Question of our age

The Tyee is pleased to be a media sponsor for the 2014 SFU Public Square Community Summit, which this debate is part of.

Tickets are going fast, but we have a contest running for ten pairs of tickets.

Contest ends Monday, Sept. 29 at midnight, so [enter now!](#)

What do you get when you combine the worldviews of Florida and Kurzweil? You could see them both as prophets of an era (our era) when the search for new and better solutions to society's problems is finally recognized as the driving force behind human history; when all it takes to succeed is a big idea and the ambition to achieve it; and when no threats to human prosperity -- not overpopulation, climate change, hunger nor full-scale ecological collapse -- are too big to be overcome.

But you could also see Florida and Kurzweil as prophets of an entirely different era. One where no creative idea has any worth unless it can be easily monetized; where urban revitalization is actually turning cities like Vancouver into enclaves for the rich and privileged; and where our dream of a world without limits makes us forget that some limits exist for a reason, like the labour unions fighting to keep such disruptive Silicon Valley firms as Uber from creating an economy of ["unrestrained hyper-capitalism."](#)

Such tensions will certainly be addressed at the fascinating evening discussion that Florida and Kurzweil will be leading Oct. 22 in Vancouver. Hosted by SFU Public Square, the event will be moderated by CBC's Amanda Lang. (Click [here](#) to get more information or to purchase tickets). The title of this speaking event is "Will innovation save us?" Where society stands on that question depends very much on how we define "innovation." In doing so we'll be defining an era.



Geoff Dembicki reports on energy and climate change for The Tyee. Find his previous stories [here](#).