



Frames in Era 7

How can we understand the human experiences and histories of the last 100 years or more? Since the First World War, huge communities like empires have broken up, but transnational communities have come into being. We have become more and more productive, but this hasn't benefitted everyone everywhere, and distribution remains unequal. We are more connected by networks than ever before, but many people feel more isolated and lonelier than ever. How is all of this a product of our long human history, and where will we go in the future?



00:01

*Bob Bain, PhD, University
of Michigan*

*Black-and-white photos
of cities destroyed by
war; artwork depicting
exhausted, injured soldiers*

BOB BAIN: When the First World War broke out in 1914, it was, for many people, unexpected. It was also deadly. It introduced new terrors such as the mass bombing of cities and poison gas warfare. Few regions of the world were untouched. Over 16 million people were killed, many of them soldiers from all over the world. Finally, in 1918, after the horrors of four years of war, people could hope for a new era of peace and prosperity. And certainly, looking back, a lot of positive progress has been made ever since that year.

00:45

Using the course's frames, we can see massive expansions and innovations that have improved human society over the past century. But these expansions and innovations did not spread equally or affect everyone in the same ways. Many problems still linger today. Some are the result of long historical patterns. But some problems are the result of recent events, and, in some cases, the very innovations of which we are so proud. We can explore these patterns through the community frame.

01:14

*Images of modern-day
bustling cities; a photo of
the Universal Declaration
of Human Rights*

The First World War was the beginning of the end of giant, intercontinental empires. Instead, today, most people are members of nation-states, communities where citizens have some political rights. For the first time in human history, most of us live in big cities with lots of services. We also have an increasing sense of a set of universal rights for all people as part of an international human community. Many people see themselves as members of communities well beyond their local area or their nation-state, including far-flung religions, or digital communities that connect us online to people with similar interests or identities.

01:55

*Images of cities filled with
unhealthy pollution*

But at the same time, many problems of the city, the nation-state, and the digital environment have yet to be solved. Life in cities may be unhealthy for many people. Many nation-states routinely deny rights to some or all their citizens. In this era, some nation-states, after denying citizens their basic rights, have even murdered millions of people. The digital community may in fact be reducing our ability to rely on our neighbors and find support from those around us.

02:27

*Photo of hundreds of cars
in a parking lot*

Fortunately, over the course of the last century, more and more people have had greater access to more food and consumer goods than ever before due to rapid expansion of production and distribution. In just about all areas of life, our systems of production have benefited from the ideas and innovations that came about through the global network of scientists, engineers, and scholars. We have become incredibly efficient producers. We can certainly make enough food and provide basic goods and services for everyone who lives on this planet.

03:02

*Photo of a cardboard sign
belonging to a homeless
person—the sign asks
for money for food and
housing*

Yet, here, too, there are problems. Despite all of our efficiency, some people live on very few resources and suffer from poverty and hunger. Nation-states have used the innovations of scientists and engineers to manufacture weapons that can destroy the planet multiple times over. And our incredible industrialized system of production and distribution has come at the cost of environmental damage. This damage is rapidly changing the world and could possibly make it unlivable in the future.

03:33

*Photo of a very crowded,
very poor area in a big city*

From the perspective of the networks frame, we can see great advances during the 20th and early 21st centuries. At the beginning of this era, we communicated by telegraph and physical mail, and traveled mainly by horse and steamship. Now we have the internet, cell phones, and jet airliners. Yet, again, this is not equal. Not everybody can fly in a plane, use the internet, or travel. And there's evidence that despite all this connectedness, people increasingly feel lonely and isolated.

04:06

*Photo montage of various
communities, large and
small*

As we construct our history of Era 7—the very recent past—we can also use these frames to begin to ask questions about what's coming in the near future. We can ask whether these patterns will continue, or if we can make changes that increase the positive features of innovation in each frame and reduce the negative. Will we increasingly feel like members of one global human community, or of online communities? Or will we turn again to local communities—family and friends—to help us navigate rapid change and globalization?

*Image of a couple on a
motorbike unable to drive
through a flood*

Will the next big steps in production and distribution automate so many jobs that most people will not be able to find work? And what will that mean for each of us? Will our continued drive for things lead to a tipping point in the world environment that makes our planet unsustainable?

*A woman wears a virtual-
reality mask*

And will networks continue to open us to new ideas, creating a world of incredible freedom? Or will they overwhelm and isolate us, each alone in virtual worlds? The future has not yet been made, but by considering the past—including the last century—we can begin to think about and plan for the future.