


[HOME](#)
[CONTACT BT](#)


[Just this Section](#)

[Whole site](#)

[Home](#) > [Innovation](#) > [Technology](#) > [A society of minds](#)
[Print this page](#)

Innovation news

Technology

[BRICs driven by innovation](#)
[Living in a world of exponential change](#)
[High praise for BT programming approach](#)
[Lesley's sought-after industry insights](#)
[Telepresence - seeing is believing](#)
[Buying into technology at shopping showcase](#)

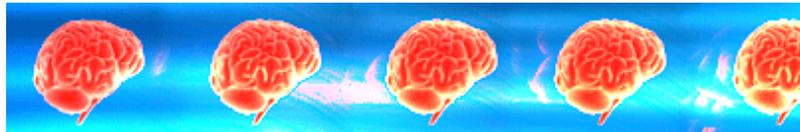
A society of minds

[Bringing companies together with technology](#)
[Jane exceeds tech ambitions](#)
[Building tomorrow's technology today](#)
[BT scores with computer that can 'watch' football](#)
[Future technology could make us all TV directors](#)
[BT gets in on podcast act](#)
[The future is female](#)
[Computers get personal](#)
[BT showcases new services](#)
[The future of fashion](#)
[Mix and Mash](#)

On the move

[Inside BT](#)
[Helping people](#)
[Gadget Zone](#)
[Futurewise](#)
[About this e-zine](#)

A society of minds



BT's head of strategic university research Jeff Patmore looks at how instant access to knowledge via the internet is changing our view of the world.

At the last count more than one billion people were connected to the internet, with 70 per cent of North Americans and 38 per cent of Europeans having access to a connection. And these numbers are accelerating every year.

It's thought it won't be long before every child attending school in the northern hemisphere is provided with a laptop computer with fast internet access.

So what will it mean for our children to have access to the sum of human knowledge at the click of a mouse?

To get some idea we need to look at the children and young adults of today. They have grown up in a world where access to knowledge is easier than it has ever been before. What changes are we seeing in these students?

As humans, we perceive and understand the world through a model that we constructed as young children and have modified through age and experience. Our world model not only allows us to understand the world around us, it also gives us a common framework for communication.

Since the industrial revolution - the last significant technology revolution - this world model has been dependent upon both our age and country of origin, with most people in a single geographic area having a similar model due to similar experiences in early life.

Geographic boundaries become irrelevant

Today, when we examine our young adults, we find they do not have the geographic boundaries - physical or mental - that previous generations held.

Travel outside their country of origin is far more common than ever before, in higher education they are far more likely to mix with students from across the globe and, of course, they have grown up with the ability to access vast amounts of knowledge via the internet, almost instantly.

The ability to access this knowledge is coupled with the ability to freely share and discuss it; not only with local communities but with groups anywhere in the world. When students are interacting through online discussion groups, they often have no idea where other people are physically - and it doesn't matter. What matters is the richness of the dialogue, the exchange of knowledge and experience.

As a consequence, the world model that these individuals hold has evolved much more rapidly than in previous generations. What we are seeing today is a revolution, on a scale not seen since the industrial revolution. And what makes this such an important point in time is that the revolution is not limited to a small group of leading nations - it is happening almost everywhere.

With the rise of broadband internet access, another key change has started to occur. With narrowband access you can read text and look at images, but with broadband access students can watch video and multimedia content. It is one thing to read a famous paper by a leading scientist or world figure, it is quite another to watch those people talk about their work.

Today's students are comfortable with this new world without geographic barriers and, moreover, they are demanding an openness of communication that has previously been unheard of. Collaboration is fast becoming the way to work, with businesses building new 'virtual' partnerships to gain commercial advantage.

Online collaboration between individuals is also now a major force. Wikipedia is a model that we would just not have believed possible a few years ago. If I had forecast that an online encyclopaedia would allow all users to edit its content I would have been ridiculed, but here it is and it is being seen as a key knowledge resource and a great model for effective collaboration. As a result, our model of how we can work together and share knowledge has changed overnight.

There will be those who will fight against this openness, because they find it threatening. For some governments, the thought of their citizens being able to freely discuss topics with anyone else in the world, instantly and without control, is of great concern. But, in most cases, the positives of collaboration will far outweigh the negatives.

The world is undergoing a truly major change in both our perception of it and the way in which we communicate our thinking. The next ten years will see more old barriers to free communication and collaboration crumble and the ease of access to knowledge increase to a point where literally anyone anywhere will be able to call up the totality of the human knowledge base and discuss and debate it with others. We will become a global society of minds.

- Jeff Patmore currently leads an innovative research initiative involving a large number of universities, institutions and business schools across the planet, investigating the future of information communication technology (ICT). You can contact Jeff by sending an e-mail to: jeff.patmore@bt.com

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