

Dr. Canton Advises New School for Futurists Sponsored by Google and NASA

Google and Nasa back new school for futurists

Google and Nasa are throwing their weight behind a new school for futurists in Silicon Valley to prepare scientists for an era when machines become cleverer than people.

The new institution, known as “**Singularity University**”, is to be headed by Ray Kurzweil, whose predictions about the exponential pace of technological change have made him a controversial figure in technology circles.

Google and Nasa’s backing demonstrates the growing mainstream acceptance of Mr Kurzweil’s views, which include a claim that before the middle of this century artificial intelligence will outstrip human beings, ushering in a new era of civilisation.

To be housed at Nasa’s Ames Research Center, a stone’s-throw from the Googleplex, the Singularity University will offer courses on biotechnology, nano-technology and artificial intelligence.

The so-called “singularity” is a theorised period of rapid technological progress in the near future. Mr Kurzweil, an American inventor, popularised the term in his 2005 book “The Singularity is Near”.

Proponents say that during the singularity, machines will be able to improve themselves using artificial intelligence and that smarter-than-human computers will solve problems including energy scarcity, climate change and hunger.

Yet many critics call the singularity dangerous. Some worry that a malicious artificial intelligence might annihilate the human race.

Mr Kurzweil said the university was launching now because many technologies were approaching a moment of radical advancement. “We’re getting to the steep part of the curve,” said Mr Kurzweil. “It’s not just electronics and computers. It’s any technology where we can measure the information content, like genetics.”

The school is backed by Larry Page, Google co-founder, and Peter Diamandis, chief executive of X-Prize, an organisation which provides grants to support technological change.

“We are anchoring the university in what is in the lab today, with an understanding of what’s in the realm of possibility in the future,” said Mr Diamandis, who will be vice-chancellor. “The day before something is truly a breakthrough, it’s a crazy idea.”

Despite its title, the school will not be an accredited university. Instead, it will be modelled on the International Space University in Strasbourg, France, the interdisciplinary, multi-cultural school that Mr Diamandis helped establish in 1987.