Former Google CEO Shares Vision in Tech Treatise

MICHAEL LIEDTKE, AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Some illuminating books already have been written about Google's catalytic role in a technological upheaval that is redefining the way people work, play, learn, shop and communicate.

Until now, though, there hasn't been a book providing an unfiltered look from inside Google's brain trust.

Google Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt, who spent a decade as the company's CEO, shares his visions of digitally driven change and of a radically different future in "The New Digital Age [1]," a book that goes on sale Tuesday.

It's a technology treatise that Schmidt wrote with another ruminator, Jared Cohen, a former State Department adviser who now runs Google Ideas, the Internet company's version of a think tank.

The book is an exercise in "brainstorming the future," as Schmidt put it in a recent post on Twitter — just one example of a cultural phenomenon that didn't exist a decade ago.

The ability for anyone with an Internet-connected device to broadcast revelatory information and video is one of the reasons why Schmidt and Cohen wrote the book. The two met in Baghdad in 2009 and were both struck by how Iraqis were finding resourceful ways to use Internet services to improve their lives, despite war-zone conditions.

They decided it was time to delve into how the Internet and mobile devices are empowering people, roiling autocratic governments and forcing long-established companies to make dramatic changes.

The three years they spent researching the book took them around the world,

including North Korea in January over the objections of the U.S. State Department. They interviewed an eclectic group that included former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Mexican mogul Carlos Slim Helu, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and the former prime ministers of Mongolia and Pakistan. They also drew on the insights of a long list of Google employees, including co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin.

The resulting book is an exploration into the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead as the lines blur between the physical world around us and the virtual realm of the Internet. Schmidt and Cohen also examine the loss of personal privacy as prominent companies such as Google and lesser-known data warehouses such as Acxiom compile digital dossiers about our electronic interactions on computers, smartphones and at check-out stands.

"This will be the first generation of humans to have an indelible record," Schmidt and Cohen predict.

To minimize the chances of youthful indiscretions stamping children with "digital scarlet letters" that they carry for years, online privacy education will become just as important — if not more so — than sex education, according to Schmidt and Cohen. They argue parents should consider having a "privacy talk" with their kids well before they become curious about sex.

Not surprisingly, the book doesn't dwell on Google's own practices, including privacy lapses that have gotten the company in trouble with regulators around the world.

Among other things, Google has exposed the contact lists of its email users while trying to build a now-defunct social network called Buzz. It scooped up people's passwords and other sensitive information from unsecured Wi-Fi networks. Last year, Google was caught circumventing privacy controls on Safari Web browsers, resulting in a record $22.5 million fine by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission. European regulators have a broad investigation open.

Google apologized for those incidents without acknowledging wrongdoing. Schmidt and Cohen suggest that is an inevitable part of digital life.

"The possibility that one's personal content will be published and become known one day — either by mistake or through criminal interference — will always exist," they write.

The book doesn't offer any concrete solutions for protecting personal privacy, though the authors suspect that calls for tougher penalties and more stringent regulations will increase as more people realize how much of their lives are now in a state of "near-permanent storage."

"The option to 'delete' data is largely an illusion," Schmidt and Cohen write.

People can choose not to put any of their information online, but those that eschew

the Internet risk become irrelevant as online identities become increasingly important, the book asserts. Schmidt and Cohen foresee an option that will allow all of a person's online accounts — Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Netflix and various other subscriptions — to be merged together into a "constellation" that will serve as a one-stop profile.

If this book is right, there is no turning back from the revolution that is making Internet access as vital as oxygen and mobile devices as important as our lungs.

As much disruption as there already has been since Google's inception in 1998, Schmidt and Cohen contend that the most jarring changes are still to come as reductions in the cost of technology bring online another 5 billion people, mostly in less developed countries. At the same time, the combination of more powerful microprocessors, much-faster Internet connections and entrepreneurial ingenuity will turn the stuff of science fiction into reality.

Schmidt and Cohen are convinced that holograms will enable people to make virtual getaways to exotic beaches whenever they feel need. Nasal implants will alert us to the first signs of a cold. Virtual assistants — the kind Google is developing with Google Now and Apple with Siri — will become constant companions that influence when we shop and what we buy. Those assistants will generally steer us in directions drawn from an analyses of our personal preferences vacuumed off the Internet and stored in vast databases.

These aren't far-out concepts to the tech cognoscenti, or even younger generations who can barely remember what it was like to surf the Web on a dial-up modem, let alone use a typewriter.

The ideas will be more unnerving to older generations still trying to figure out all the things that their smartphone can do.

Schmidt, who will turn 58 on Saturday, can remember the days before there were personal computers. But he has been studying tech trends for decades, long before he became Google's CEO in 2001 and became a mentor and confidant to company co-founders Page and Brin. That collaboration established him as one of the world's best-known executives and minted him as a multibillionaire. Before joining Google, he was chief technology officer at Sun Microsystems and CEO of software maker Novell Inc.

Many of the book's themes expand upon topics that Schmidt regularly mused about in speeches and interviews that he gave as Google's CEO. Some of his past remarks, particularly about the loss of privacy, rankled critics who believe Google had become too aggressive in trying to learn more about people's individual interests so it could sell more ads, its chief source of revenue.

Schmidt also won plenty of admirers in powerful places, including President Barack Obama, who called upon Schmidt's advice during his 2008 campaign. Political pundits once considered Schmidt to be a leading candidate to join Obama's cabinet, though Schmidt has said he never had any interest in a government job.

Schmidt relinquished the CEO job to Page two years ago, freeing him to devote more time traveling to meet government leaders around the world.

Cohen, 31, is regarded as a rising star in tech circles, though he isn't as well-known as his co-author. Time magazine just named Cohen as one of the world's 100 most influential people in its annual list. Cohen worked on State Department policy planning and counter-terrorism in both the Bush and Obama administrations.

Schmidt and Cohen emerged from their research convinced that most governments don't fully understand the implications of ubiquitous Internet access and mobile computing. They expect repressive regimes to do everything in their power control the flow of information and to abuse databases to spy on citizens. They also foresee smaller countries waging computer-based attacks on countries they would never target with troops and weapons.

Even as they address the dark sides of technology, Schmidt and Cohen hypothesize that the world ultimately will be better off as more people spend more time connected to each other on the Internet. Societies will be more democratic, governments will become less corrupt as their transgressions are exposed and people will become smarter and better informed.

"Never before in history have so many people, from so many places, had so much power at their fingertips," Schmidt and Cohen assert.

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"The New Digital Age" is being published by Alfred A. Knopf with a suggested retail price of $26.95.

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Online:

http://newdigitalage.com [1]

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