

Julian King: Securing the Digital Revolution

The world is hurtling toward a more decentralized digital future, characterized by unprecedented linkages among people, data, and objects. In order to reap the benefits of innovation, without creating massive vulnerabilities, we need to anticipate and address the threats now, **writes Julian King**



Julian King, a former British ambassador to Ireland and France, is the EU Security Union Commissioner

Another connectivity revolution

Pity the person who invests heavily in canals right before the railways start operating. You could understand, for example, why the sponsor of the Bridgewater Canal (perhaps England's first) would vehemently oppose the planned Liverpool and Manchester Railway. But the march of technology could not be stopped – nor could the new challenges it raised.

The same is true of today's digital innovations. When the L&M Railway eventually opened in 1830, it was a revolutionary success, kickstarting the age of steam and changing the world in ways that could not have been foreseen. As the railway age unfolded, with metal tracks spreading across the industrializing world like veins on a leaf, a new level of connectivity was achieved, which criminals

were quick to exploit.

The word is on the brink of another revolution in connectivity

Indeed, an entire police force eventually had to be created to manage railway security. With the world on the brink of another revolution in connectivity, especially in terms of infrastructure that will fundamentally change the way we connect with each other, the lessons of this experience should not be ignored. And the coming phase of the digital age will affect far more than just transportation. We are not talking about the Internet of Things, but about the Internet of Everything: a more decentralized digital future, connecting people, data, and objects like never before.

We must be alert to new security issues

In terms of security, we need to ensure we aren't sitting, as it were, on a slow-moving canal barge while the 8:15 to Manchester flashes past. We need to take a clear-eyed look at the strategic vulnerabilities that these technologies will bring, and anticipate how malicious actors could attempt to exploit new digital infrastructure for their own gain or to deploy it as a weapon.

Some challenges, such as the misuse of social media to spread disinformation – using, among others, cutting-edge tools like deepfake videos and artificial intelligence – are already clear.

But, crucially, we are also talking in terms of the infrastructure itself. The fifth generation of mobile communication technology, 5G, poses a particular challenge. It will be the backbone of global connectivity, which raises strategic and security questions about issues like supply-chain security and provenance. How can we be sure that the components used in future generations of European technology – not only 5G – will be secure?

Common standards and rules are required

Already, digital supply-chain security is far from airtight, reflected in recent reports of companies finding mysterious chips on their server motherboards, seemingly added at the time of manufacture. The British government has warned telecoms companies to consider their suppliers very carefully, while the United States has been looking to restrict some kinds of foreign direct investment in key technologies like semiconductors and robotics.

To secure the digital-infrastructure supply chain, we need greater transparency regarding the provenance of technological components. Maintaining a diversity of suppliers is also vital. Furthermore, common standards and rules are needed to establish the trustworthiness of international partners.

That is the basis of a recent proposal by French President Emmanuel Macron, described in the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace. The Internet, according to Macron, has become a site of conflict, where malicious actors exploit the vulnerabilities of digital products and services. He proposes that Europe create an "Internet of Trust," based on lawfulness and cooperation. I agree. Europeans should be able to continue enjoying their online lives secure in the knowledge that their fundamental values and rights, such as free speech, are protected.

Future strategy

We need a strategy that balances our need to harness technological innovation in order to safeguard our economic future with the need to avoid creating massive security vulnerabilities in the process. And with the technology train already hurtling down the track, we must act fast to mitigate current risks and ensure that we are laying the groundwork needed to avoid future threats. In confronting this admittedly huge challenge, we need to avoid short-sighted responses, such as protectionism and other measures that stifle innovation. Instead, we must map the scale and extent of the risk, and decide what is truly strategic.

We need to avoid short-sighted responses

For Europe, this means not just protecting supply chains, but also pursuing large-scale, coordinated investment in our own tech industries. The European Commission is uniquely well placed to drive this cross-sectoral work. It is not too late for Europe to safeguard its digital future. Even the owner of the Bridgewater Canal eventually saw the way the wind was blowing – and invested heavily in the rival railway.

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Author

Amrita Naik Nimbalkar

Junior Economist, Global Macro

amrita.naik.nimbalkar@ing.com

Mateusz Sutowicz

Senior Economist, Poland

mateusz.sutowicz@ing.pl

Alissa Lefebvre

Economist

alissa.lefebvre@ing.com

Deepali Bhargava

Regional Head of Research, Asia-Pacific

Deepali.Bhargava@ing.com

Ruben Dewitte

Economist

+32495364780

ruben.dewitte@ing.com

Kinga Havasi

Economic research trainee

kinga.havasi@ing.com

Marten van Garderen

Consumer Economist, Netherlands

marten.van.garderen@ing.com

David Havrlant

Chief Economist, Czech Republic

420 770 321 486

david.havrlant@ing.com

Sander Burgers

Senior Economist, Dutch Housing

sander.burgers@ing.com

Lynn Song

Chief Economist, Greater China

lynn.song@asia.ing.com

Michiel Tukker

Senior European Rates Strategist

michiel.tukker@ing.com

Michal Rubaszek

Senior Economist, Poland

michal.rubaszek@ing.pl

This is a test author

Stefan Posea

Economist, Romania

tiberiu-stefan.posea@ing.com

Marine Leleux

Sector Strategist, Financials

marine.leleux2@ing.com

Jesse Norcross

Senior Sector Strategist, Real Estate

jesse.norcross@ing.com

Teise Stellema

Research Assistant, Energy Transition

teise.stellema@ing.com

Diederik Stadig

Sector Economist, TMT & Healthcare

diederik.stadig@ing.com

Diogo Gouveia

Sector Economist

diogo.duarte.vieira.de.gouveia@ing.com

Marine Leleux

Sector Strategist, Financials

marine.leleux2@ing.com

Ewa Manthey

Commodities Strategist

ewa.manthey@ing.com

ING Analysts

James Wilson

EM Sovereign Strategist

James.wilson@ing.com

Sophie Smith

Digital Editor

sophie.smith@ing.com

Frantisek Taborsky

EMEA FX & FI Strategist

frantisek.taborsky@ing.com

Adam Antoniak

Senior Economist, Poland

adam.antoniak@ing.pl

Min Joo Kang

Senior Economist, South Korea and Japan

min.joo.kang@asia.ing.com

Coco Zhang

ESG Research

coco.zhang@ing.com

Jan Frederik Slijkerman

Senior Sector Strategist, TMT

jan.frederik.slijkerman@ing.com

Katinka Jongkind

Senior Economist, Services and Leisure

Katinka.Jongkind@ing.com

Marina Le Blanc

Sector Strategist, Financials
Marina.Le.Blanc@ing.com

Samuel Abettan
Junior Economist
samuel.abettan@ing.com

Franziska Biehl
Senior Economist, Germany
Franziska.Marie.Biehl@ing.de

Rebecca Byrne
Senior Editor and Supervisory Analyst
rebecca.byrne@ing.com

Mirjam Bani
Sector Economist, Commercial Real Estate & Public Sector (Netherlands)
mirjam.bani@ing.com

Timothy Rahill
Credit Strategist
timothy.rahill@ing.com

Leszek Kasek
Senior Economist, Poland
leszek.kasek@ing.pl

Oleksiy Soroka, CFA
Senior High Yield Credit Strategist
oleksiy.soroka@ing.com

Antoine Bouvet
Head of European Rates Strategy
antoine.bouvet@ing.com

Jeroen van den Broek
Global Head of Sector Research
jeroen.van.den.broek@ing.com

Edse Dantuma
Senior Sector Economist, Industry and Healthcare
edse.dantuma@ing.com

Francesco Pesole
FX Strategist
francesco.pesole@ing.com

Rico Luman

Senior Sector Economist, Transport and Logistics
Rico.Luman@ing.com

Jurjen Witteveen
Sector Economist
jurjen.witteveen@ing.com

Dmitry Dolgin
Chief Economist, CIS
dmitry.dolgin@ing.de

Nicholas Mapa
Senior Economist, Philippines
nicholas.antonio.mapa@asia.ing.com

Egor Fedorov
Senior Credit Analyst
egor.fedorov@ing.com

Sebastian Franke
Consumer Economist
sebastian.franke@ing.de

Gerben Hieminga
Senior Sector Economist, Energy
gerben.hieminga@ing.com

Nadège Tillier
Head of Corporates Sector Strategy
nadege.tillier@ing.com

Charlotte de Montpellier
Senior Economist, France and Switzerland
charlotte.de.montpellier@ing.com

Laura Straeter
Behavioural Scientist
+31(0)611172684
laura.Straeter@ing.com

Valentin Tataru
Chief Economist, Romania
valentin.tataru@ing.com

James Smith
Developed Markets Economist, UK
james.smith@ing.com

Suvi Platerink Kosonen

Senior Sector Strategist, Financials

suvi.platerink-kosonen@ing.com

Thijs Geijer

Senior Sector Economist, Food & Agri

thijs.geijer@ing.com

Maurice van Sante

Senior Economist Construction & Team Lead Sectors

maurice.van.sante@ing.com

Marcel Klok

Senior Economist, Netherlands

marcel.klok@ing.com

Piotr Poplawski

Senior Economist, Poland

piotr.poplawski@ing.pl

Paolo Pizzoli

Senior Economist, Italy, Greece

paolo.pizzoli@ing.com

Marieke Blom

Chief Economist and Global Head of Research

marieke.blom@ing.com

Raoul Leering

Senior Macro Economist

raoul.leering@ing.com

Maarten Leen

Head of Global IFRS9 ME Scenarios

maarten.leen@ing.com

Maureen Schuller

Head of Financials Sector Strategy

Maureen.Schuller@ing.com

Warren Patterson

Head of Commodities Strategy

Warren.Patterson@asia.ing.com

Rafal Benecki

Chief Economist, Poland

rafal.benecki@ing.pl

Philippe Ledent

Senior Economist, Belgium, Luxembourg

philippe.ledent@ing.com

Peter Virovacz

Senior Economist, Hungary

peter.virovacz@ing.com

Inga Fechner

Senior Economist, Germany, Global Trade

inga.fechner@ing.de

Dimitry Fleming

Senior Data Analyst, Netherlands

Dimitry.Fleming@ing.com

Ciprian Dascalu

Chief Economist, Romania

+40 31 406 8990

ciprian.dascalu@ing.com

Muhammet Mercan

Chief Economist, Turkey

muhammet.mercan@ingbank.com.tr

Iris Pang

Chief Economist, Greater China

iris.pang@asia.ing.com

Sophie Freeman

Writer, Group Research

+44 20 7767 6209

Sophie.Freeman@uk.ing.com

Padhraic Garvey, CFA

Regional Head of Research, Americas

padhraic.garvey@ing.com

James Knightley

Chief International Economist, US

james.knightley@ing.com

Tim Condon

Asia Chief Economist

+65 6232-6020

Martin van Vliet

Senior Interest Rate Strategist

+31 20 563 8801

martin.van.vliet@ing.com

Karol Pogorzelski

Senior Economist, Poland

Karol.Pogorzelski@ing.pl

Carsten Brzeski

Global Head of Macro

carsten.brzeski@ing.de

Viraj Patel

Foreign Exchange Strategist

+44 20 7767 6405

viraj.patel@ing.com

Owen Thomas

Global Head of Editorial Content

+44 (0) 207 767 5331

owen.thomas@ing.com

Bert Colijn

Chief Economist, Netherlands

bert.colijn@ing.com

Peter Vanden Houte

Chief Economist, Belgium, Luxembourg, Eurozone

peter.vandenhoute@ing.com

Benjamin Schroeder

Senior Rates Strategist

benjamin.schroeder@ing.com

Chris Turner

Global Head of Markets and Regional Head of Research for UK & CEE

chris.turner@ing.com

Gustavo Rangel

Chief Economist, LATAM

+1 646 424 6464

gustavo.rangel@ing.com

Carlo Cocuzzo

Economist, Digital Finance

+44 20 7767 5306

carlo.cocuzzo@ing.com