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On This Topic

Population Aging and Korean Society

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Introduction: Korea's Aging

Currently, South Korea is facing the challenge of a rapidly aging population, a result of falling birth rates and longer life expectancy. This phenomenon is in full swing as the country's baby boomers,[1] the largest cohort of the Korean population, reach retirement age. Decreasing fertility rates and extended life spans have both negative and positive effects, respectively, on population size, and also increase the average age (J. Lee 2016, 85). Aging may be divided into the *individual aging*, i.e. an increase in an individual's life expectancy, and population aging, which refers to aging collectively at the social level (Choi 2015, 3). Changes in the population structure are mainly due to changes in the birth-to-death ratio, which is reflected in an increase in the proportion of the elderly aged

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1. The term *baby boom* refers to a population phenomenon in which the number of births increases significantly compared to previous periods. Historically, after World War II, the number of births increased significantly as the younger generation, who had delayed marriage and childbirth, started families (Kim, et al. 2006). In Korea, this boom began about 1955, when stability returned with the end of World War II, the attainment of national independence, and then the end of the Korean War (1950–1953). In general, the baby boom period in Korea extended from around 1955 to 1964. However, the period 1965–1974, including the subsequent population rebound, is sometimes referred to as the Late Baby Boom (Kim 2010).

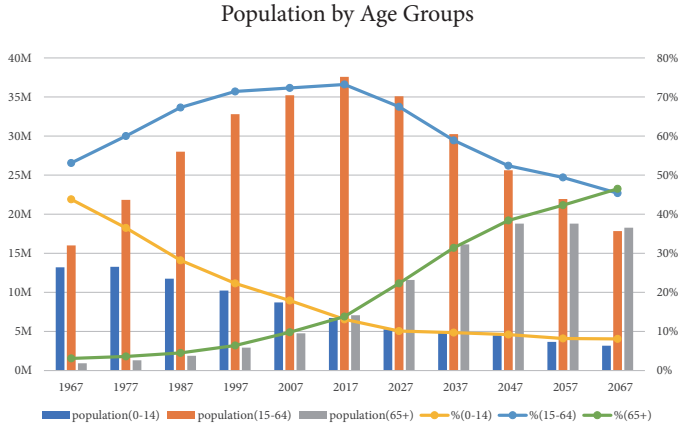
sixty-five or older in society.

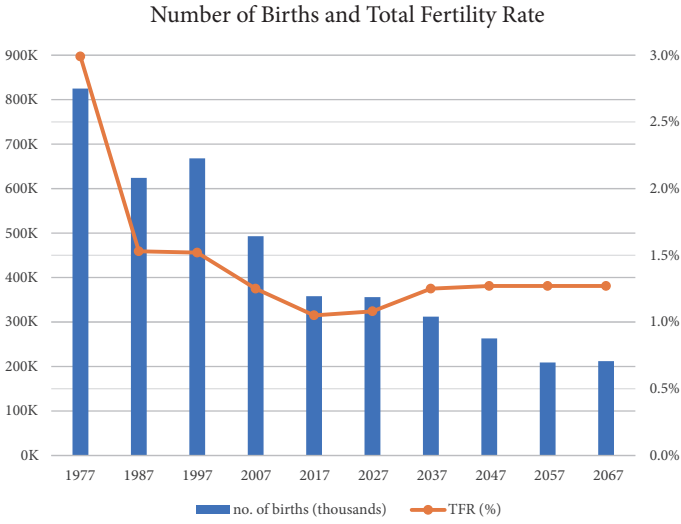
The problem of aging is a common phenomenon in advanced economies. However, in Korea, the pace of aging is particularly rapid, making it difficult to respond to the various social problems it brings. South Korea's population has been growing rather sluggishly since the year 2000, when its share of elderly aged 65 or older surpassed the threshold of seven percent of the total population, thereby making it an *aging society*. In 2017, the percentage of the elderly population exceeded 14 percent, making Korea an aged society, and by 2026 its elderly population is expected to make up 21 percent of the total population, thus turning Korea into a *super-aged society*. The problem is that the pace of Korea's aging is so rapid that international comparisons are difficult. It took France 115 years time to move from an aging to an aged society, compared to Korea's 18 years (Lee 2018a). The transition to a super-aged society is also expected to happen within the next decade.

In this special issue, we examine the social problems brought about by demographic change in Korea. Population itself is a social phenomenon that can engender various social problems. Changes in social characteristics affect three population-related factors: birth, death, and migration, resulting in changes in the population structure, such as total population, gender ratios, and age distribution (Choi 2015). These changes in population and its structure in turn impact social phenomena. We would therefore like to consider social problems in terms of the impact produced by changes in population structure, namely the political and social effects of rapid aging. We believe that detailing the social impact of a rapidly aging society can prove useful for many of the world's countries that are experiencing similar problems today.

First, let us consider the main characteristics of population change. Korea's population is expected to increase from 51.36 million in 2017 to 51.94 million people in 2028, then decreasing to 39.29 million people by 2067, which is the same level as 1982. The natural decline in population that occurs when the number of deaths exceeds that of births is expected to begin in 2029 due to the continuing decline in birth rates and the simultaneous aging of the population. The annual number of births in

South Korea, which exceeded 700,000 in the early 1990s, is expected to drop to 350,000 by 2017, 290,000 by 2021, and 210,000 by 2067. The total fertility rate, which equals the average number of births expected by a woman during her childbearing period, has been decreasing since 2002, reaching the extremely low birth rate of less than 1.3. However, in 2020 it declined even further to 0.84, the first time this indicator fell below unity for three years in a row.





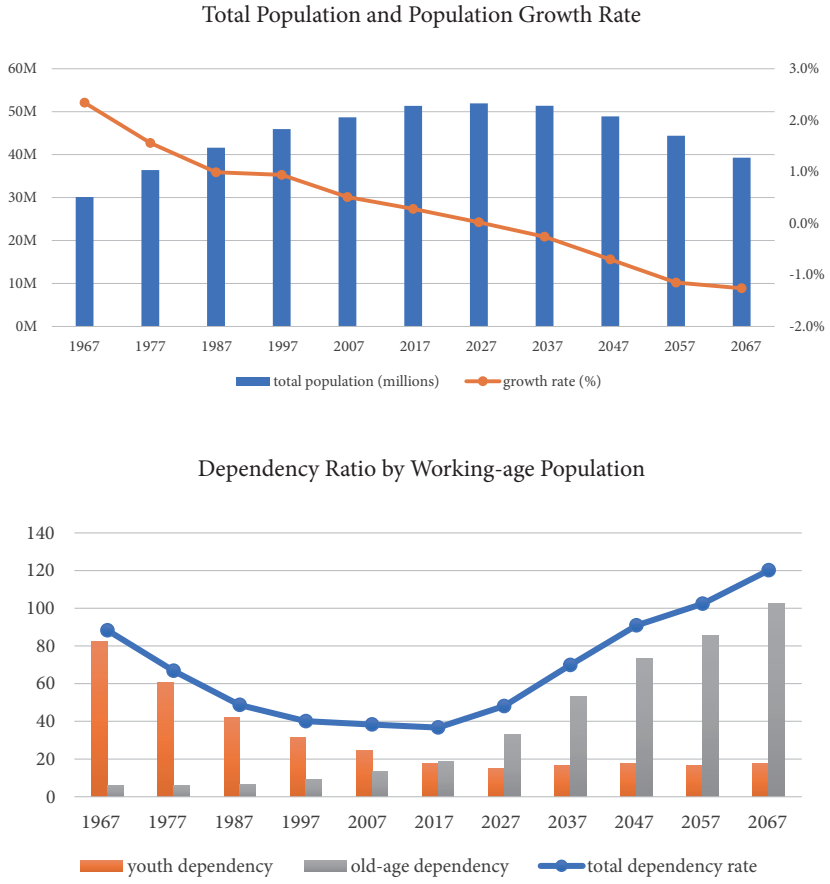


Figure 1. South Korean population dynamics

Notes: Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS), accessed April 28, 2021, https://kosis.kr/visual/populationKorea/index/index.do?mb=N.

As of 2017, 73.2 percent (37.57 million) of the total population were aged 15 to 64, with 13.8 percent (7.07 million) elderly (aged 65 or older), and 13.1 percent (6.72 million) youth (aged 0 to 14). By 2067, the working-age population is expected to account for 45.4 percent of the total population,

the elderly for 46.5 percent, and youth for 8.1 percent. The elderly population aged 65 or older is expected to surpass 10 million by 2025, and 19.91 million by 2050. The share of the elderly of the total population is expected to increase rapidly, from 13.8 percent in 2017, surpassing 20 percent by 2026, 30 percent by 2036, and 40 percent by 2051. The dependency ratio is equal to the number of youth and elderly population requiring support per 100 working-age population. The total dependency rate, which combines youth and old-age dependency, is expected to exceed 70 in 2038, which is a rise from 36.7 in 2017, reaching the level of more than 100 by 2056. The youth dependency rate is expected to remain similar between 2017 and 2067, at 17.9 and 17.8, respectively, as the youth and working-age population are both decreasing, with the elderly dependency rate expected to increase by 5.5 times, from 18.8 in 2017 to 102.4 in 2067.

Aging and Social Problems

Today, Korean society faces the triple challenges of slow economic growth, low birth rates, and aging. The task of tracing the origins of aging in Korean society is not easy. Aging is a double-edged social phenomenon characterized by a decline in the economic activity of the elderly population on the one hand, and by an increase in the social burden caused by rising medical costs along with the growing life expectancy, on the other (Rowe and Kahn 2015). The latter is certainly a blessing, but the kind of life that aged persons will live after retirement is not a matter of individual ability but a challenge for all members of society, thus creating the need for a social and policy response (Choi 2018). Aging results not only in changes in the population structure; an aging population presents society with a very complex policy task that not only accompanies economic, political, and socio-cultural changes, but also requires responses in various areas.

Figure 2 depicts the variety of conflicts caused by aging and the related policy tasks. What we need to pay attention to is that the phenomenon of

aging is multifaceted and complex and cannot be limited to any particular area, but rather is linked to several major areas. First, let us look at the effects of aging on the economy. In general, aging is known to have a negative impact on the economy in total, accompanied by a decrease in the working population and a decrease in production. In addition, older people tend to work less and save less as well, causing a reduction in the amount of both labor and capital in the economy. In addition, rising pension and health costs are likely to increase the financial burden borne by the working population, thus leading to further declines in growth potential.

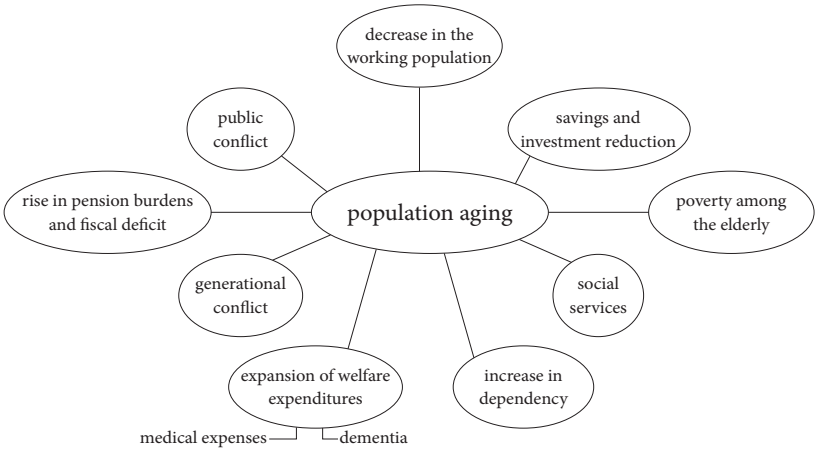


Figure 2. Population aging and its related issues

Source: Author.

Socially, the surge in the aged population is likely to increase the dependency rate and thereby increase the burden borne by public pension and health insurance institutions (Bongaarts 2004). The Korean experience also demonstrates that the financial burden associated with aging can be too difficult to cope with (Cho 2005). As the population ages, the burden of social support increases so that discussions are being held about

increasing the participation of the elderly in economic activities in order to alleviate poverty among the elderly. Controversy over the wage system and the adjustment of the retirement age will intensify. The demand for welfare services and medical support for the elderly is expected to increase rapidly. Changes in the working population and the working environment will likely lead to an increased population movement between countries and the expansion of multicultural families. Conflicts between Koreans and foreigners are also increasing due to increasing immigration as well as increased numbers of refugees. The traditional family type has collapsed, with single-person households increasingly common. At the same time, individualism is deepening and the social networks based on Confucian values that have sustained Korean society for centuries are facing an existential crisis.

On the political side, inter-generational conflicts are growing as the burden on future generations increases due to the increased welfare budgets and greater demand for pensions and the issuance of government bonds in order to cover these expenses. In addition, the growing number of older voters and their active participation in the voting process are accelerating the trend of the so-called *silver democracy* (*silbeo minjujuui*), in which political decision-making is in the hands of older citizens (Lee 2018a). In addition, the demand for facilities for elderly dementia patients is increasing as their numbers surge. There is also a demand for more cremation facilities. Due to the rapidly aging population, public conflicts are intensifying over facilities for the elderly. In addition, while the centralization of metropolitan areas accelerates due to changes in the population structure between regions, conflicts between cities and rural areas due to the hollowing out of farming and fishing villages, as well as the aging population, are also becoming a major issue.

Along with the social changes that the aging population will bring, discussions about revitalizing social participation by the elderly are also becoming more active. In particular, it is imperative to actively develop and utilize the potential of science and technology in order to increase the safety, accessibility, and convenience of information and communication, transportation, housing, and public spaces for the elderly in order to

expand their social participation and enhance their mobility. In addition, discussions on the problems arising from discrepancies between a person's social and biological age (such as the official threshold age for a senior citizen) and death (life treatment, death with dignity, etc.) are also becoming active.

Overview of the Special Issue on Population Aging in Korea

As a result of this demographic transition, the country's system and structures—in terms of healthcare, the economy, politics, and society—are facing new challenges. This special issue aims to systematically analyze the causes and developmental processes associated with the political and social conflicts that an aging population will bring. We intend to present a response strategy and policy alternatives for the integration and co-prosperity of Korean society.

First, we analyze the social and public conflicts that aging will bring and explore policy alternatives that address the structural causes of such conflicts and produce stakeholder analysis and scenarios of the future conflicts' development. To this end, Seong-Rae Cho and Yongseok Seo analyze Korea's aging in terms of the conflict issues such aging will bring so as to formulate a preemptive response. They conduct a comparative case analysis between Korea and Japan. The authors focus on three areas of public conflict: 1) increased demand for cremation facilities; 2) expansion of elderly care and dementia patient facilities; and 3) job competition between the young and elderly due to the extended legal retirement age. Then, by applying the conflict process frame of Dahrendorf (1990) and Coser (1964), the situations of the two countries are analyzed in terms of structural changes, deepening awareness of these changes, and mobilization of organizational-political power. Korea and Japan are experiencing similar social phenomena and problems due to aging. However, there are certain differences in how these phenomena are perceived and issues resolved. The background to these differences may be summarized as: 1) long-standing ideological confrontation in Korea;

2) differences in the cultural perception of conflict between Japan and Korea; and 3) differences in governance in terms of social consensus and institutional acceptance.

Second, we focus more closely on the problems of generational conflict that aging population will bring in terms of inter-generational resource allocation related to pensions, welfare payments, and jobs. To this end, Hangsub Choi analyzes an important problem of the younger generation's perception of older people in Korea. The focus of this study is on the factors behind youth's negative feelings towards the elderly that the authors refer to as *disgust*. The study provides an interesting discussion on the differences between different generational layers in Korea, concluding that intergenerational conflict in Korea is best characterized as disgust harbored by youngsters toward the elderly. A number of reasons behind this disgust are then discussed.

Choi sets out to identify the social causes of the younger generation's growing disgust toward the elderly in Korean society. Inter-generational conflict is likely to occur in any society, the author points out, but it becomes a serious social problem when that conflict turns to disgust, as is the case in Korea today. Choi also explains how the elderly are a diverse group, but that the younger generation perceives them as a monolithic unit and expresses its disgust by generalizing to all the elderly the negative perceptions of each of the differentiated elderly groups. The first social cause of the young generation's hatred toward the elderly is the negative perception of physical aging. Physical aging causes slowness in judgment and movement. Physical aging leads to atrophy of the appearance, and the rejection of the physical signs of aging has emerged strongly as a strong trend in contemporary Korean society. Another social cause is found in language use, attitude, and behavior caused by the elderly's embodiment of historical values and experiences. The language, attitude, and behavior of the elderly, who are generally accustomed to a hierarchical social order and Confucian values and who at the same time have had little opportunity to learn civic consciousness, prompt disgust on the part of the younger generation, who have come of age learning about democratic relations, horizontal culture, and civic consciousness. Further, such feelings of loathing toward the

elderly circulate and grow as they are rapidly shared through social media, commonly used by the younger generation. Finally, another important social issue Choi points out is the feeling of alienation perceived by Korean youth who experience lack of fair competition in the labor market, giving rise to anger that in turn leads to disgust toward the elderly.

Third, we analyze characteristics of the political processes surrounding the increase in the elderly population. Here we seek to analyze differences in preferences for policy agenda items by age groups as well as the link between these preferences and welfare populism emerging at the candidate and party levels. By means of this analysis, we explore the possibility of the emergence of so-called silver democracy in Korea.

Hyun-Chool Lee examines the impact of the growing elderly population on electoral politics in Korean society by using the results of a survey conducted after the 21st general elections. In particular, Lee empirically analyzes the perception of senior voters on policy salience as well as on the expansion of government spending on senior welfare programs as part of a debate surrounding silver democracy, which forecasts a senior-dominated representative democracy as senior citizen impact grows in elections concomitant with their growing numbers. Interestingly, the results demonstrate that voter age is not an important factor affecting one's policy preferences, while support for the expansion of government spending on welfare policies for the elderly does not exhibit a statistically significant correlation with age. Yet, according to the author's cluster analysis of senior voters, the four clusters identified can be clearly divided along income and ideology dimensions. Finally, the study provides five possible explanations for why age seems to produce no impact on the voter reaction to the expansion of government spending on welfare programs or senior welfare policies.

Fourth, we discuss how science and technology might be used to address the challenges caused by population aging, exploring technological possibilities that might help overcome the problems of an aged society by removing age as a factor in social activities.

Ilhan Bae focuses on enhancing the mobility of the elderly who find it difficult to access public transportation networks. Telecom services such

as video calls are structurally limited in their ability to serve as proxies for the mobility needs of an aging population. In order to counter the limited mobility of the elderly, Bae suggests an alternative telecom model to utilize the opposite party as a user's avatar-in-reality, namely using a remote-controlled video-call transporter to travel to a specific destination desired by the user. This alternative telecom model is defined as a real avatar service (RAS). To highlight the usefulness of RAS, Bae's study first explores the structural limitations of simply enhancing public transportation and telecom services to alleviate the problem of limited mobility among the growing numbers of elderly. Inspired by theories of media determinism, Bae then designs an alternative telecom model that creates an avatar-in-reality. In his literature review, the author shows how shaping the elderly's avatar-in-reality is a useful and functionally distinguished alternative compared to existing telecom services and transportation networks that seek to enhance elderly mobility.

These four papers offer in-depth analysis of the political and social impacts of an aging population, providing implications for developing policy alternatives that would help resolve emerging social conflicts related to aging by shedding light on the structural causes of that aging. In addition, we seek with these studies to focus on the problem of organizing a society whose members can lead healthy, long, and meaningful lives in an environment wherein the elderly population is growing in Korea, both in numbers and as a proportion of the total population. Creating a society where any member might serve for as long as possible as an active and contributing member is a common concern around the world. Science and technology play an important role not only in curbing the negative effects of increases in social security costs and in responding to a decreasing population (especially the working population), but also in enabling the elderly to live comfortably in a friendly and supportive environment. It is our intention with these papers to offer several potentials for the optimal form of aged society, where technological support is implemented, social institutions or systems supporting the development and dissemination of technologies for the elderly are maintained, and related technologies are accepted and implemented.

Conclusion and Agenda for Future Research

The papers in this special issue aim at analyzing the impact of a rapidly aging Korean society on politics, administration, and society. As we have noted, the effects of aging are vast and comprehensive, which makes it impossible for the papers in this special issue to cover all relevant areas. In particular, the analysis of the economic impact was excluded because this is a distinct and important issue in and of itself.

Aging is changing the structure and culture of our society. The problem is that the aging of the Korean population is progressing so rapidly that it is difficult to learn from the related experiences of other countries. Discussions and responses on the political and social effects of aging in Western Europe are relevant to the Korean experience in essence but not in speed, so that the ripple effects are expected to be relatively more significant in Korea than elsewhere. According to UN statistics (2017), Korea's proportion of population aged 60 or over will rank fifth in the world in 2050 after Japan, Spain, Portugal, and Greece.

A close review of the effects of demographic changes on democracy is needed. Representative democracies and welfare states have developed in response to periodic crises arising from the basic contradiction in capitalist production: the increasing socialization of production and continuing private appropriation (Offe 1984). In terms of representative democracy, new social movements, deliberative democracy, and participatory democracy have been sought according to the change of major actors, such as political parties and trade unions, or the emergence of new socio-economic issues.

In addition, new welfare-state models, such as workfare, activation policies that attract welfare recipients outside of the labor market, and basic income guarantees have emerged as a result of changes in labor and welfare relations. It is worth noting that such changes call for new democratic models, with a modified form of democracy determining the new welfare paradigm.

Representative democracies today face major changes in terms of the structure of political parties and unions. Advanced democracies have

two aspects to them: a political and an economic, with the political side controlled by voters and the economic having producers and wage earners (Lee 2018a). In the past, these two sides were successfully integrated to form a system in which the working population also possessed political control. However, due to aging populations, the separation of the economically and politically active population, i.e., the workforce and the elderly who do not work, has become a major issue in many countries (Lee and Moon 2019). In the early days of democracy, the economically and politically active populations formed the same structure so that their economic needs were aligned. Today, however, this alignment is no longer present. A sudden increase in the number of elderly people who do not engage in economic activities but can vote makes us wonder whether society's future needs can be accurately addressed by the political system. As the discrepancy between cost-holders and service beneficiaries increases, financial management appears to be at risk of operating inefficiently (Lee 2018a).

It is also worthwhile to note lifestyle changes brought about by the aging of society. A society characterized by a low fertility rate and an aging population can entail the dissolution of adult authority. As shown by Hangsub Choi in this issue, the conviction among the younger generation of Koreans that it is right to unconditionally obey adults rather than one's own judgment no longer holds true. The idea that the individual is more important than the community has come to gradually dominate society (Lee 2018b). Korean society will face more challenges than just the aging phenomenon. The country's baby boomer generation has reached an advanced age. The problem that Korea is likely to face in the coming years, i.e., a combination of low fertility rate and rapidly aging population, is having immediate consequences for our lives, undermining the system of social security as well as the provision of medical services and pensions. Between 2020 and 2029 the baby boomer generation will reach the early aged period (65–74), and ten years after that, Korea will become super-aged (75+) society. Thus far, for Korea the problem of an aging society has been related to the speed of that aging process, but after 2020, the proportion of the country's aging population will become a more serious

problem. Whether Korea can effectively deal with these issues, socially and politically, is a serious question.

In this special issue, Ilhan Bae's paper explored the potential of avatars to support and enhance the lives of the elderly. Devices and technologies that support the elderly have been expanded, starting with supplementary support technology for the disabled. Korea is one of the countries with highest life expectancy, and is experiencing the challenges of an aged society earlier than most the world. With the aim of improving the quality of life for the elderly and reducing the burden of nursing and welfare, a social foundation is being established to develop and promote the use of supporting devices for the elderly. Expectations are high for technologies that support citizens' social participation regardless of age or disability, and assist people who live alone to remain active and socially engaged until the end of their lives.

Korea, which is characterized by an exceptionally high speed of aging of her population and a high average life expectancy compared to the rest of the world, is expected to find technological solutions to the problems brought about by aging. However, the elderly are not uniform, their lifestyles vary greatly, and the skills needed to support the elderly are thus rather broad. An assistive technology (AT) that supports the lives of the elderly requires a technological response to the various types of elderly in order to support their lives in ways elderly individuals desire. In addition, if a specific technology is to be accepted by society to support the lives of the elderly, it is necessary to overcome the ethical, legal, and social challenges related to this technology.

Differences in standards and certification systems at home and abroad will present challenges that require addressing in order to develop an industry producing technology to support the elderly that might be marketed for export. The associated institutional and ethical tasks include securing product safety, self-determination in the use of technology, compatibility of use and protection of privacy issues in the process of dealing with technology and personal information, and determining the extent to which technology can intervene in our lives. In addition, it is also necessary to disseminate and support those technologies

using information and communication networks. Certain supporting technologies appear to be indispensable as well, such as technologies that support the overhaul of communication environments throughout society. Finally, it is important to create the institutional and legal frameworks to enable the protection and utilization of personal information.

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