

# Esther Dyson on health, technology and Silicon Valley ('It's totally a bubble')

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Esther Dyson Mike McGregor for The Wall Street Journal

The philanthropist and investor Esther Dyson was recently shopping at Whole Foods when an angry 5-year-old started stamping his foot and screaming, “Dad, I want the broccoli! I want the broccoli!” A surprising choice for a youngster, perhaps, but Ms. Dyson, 62, was sympathetic. Known for her involvement in technology and aerospace, she is now tackling health—or, as she prefers to say, trying to “produce” it—through her nonprofit HICcup, which stands for Health Initiative Coordinating Council.

The group aims to help communities actively improve their residents’ health in a variety of ways, from helping them to connect with grocery stores and restaurants in test-marketing healthy food to encouraging citizens to exercise with fitness trackers. Part of the goal is to test the idea that these approaches work best in combination. “I’m not a traditional philanthropist,” says Ms. Dyson, sitting shoeless and cross-legged on a beanbag in her office in downtown Manhattan.

She’s wearing a geek-chic ensemble of jeans, T-shirt and fitness-tracking bracelet, but Ms. Dyson isn’t a typical tech investor either. Instead of investing in what she calls “redundant” friend-finder apps and social-media companies, she has helped fund ventures as varied as space tourism and air taxis. She now wants to prompt innovation in promoting health.

Since she announced the launch of HICcup nearly a year ago, Ms. Dyson has attended conferences on everything from city transportation systems to school lunches to the “quantified self,” a movement to use technology and data for self-measurement. The nonprofit is now starting its first major initiative, a competition among five communities of no more than 100,000 people to see which one has the greatest improvement in health and vitality over five years. The winning community will get a reward up to \$5 million, and HICcup will share the results with other communities interested in making their own changes.

“The motivation is not to help these nice people in five cities to have better lives,” she explains. “It’s to prove a business model and to generate evidence and facts.” For example, she hopes that at least one community will test the idea that starting school two hours later could help children do better in school because they would get more sleep. And she hopes to collaborate with retailers such as grocery stores to help market healthier products and study consumer behavior such as customers’ ordering patterns (with their consent).

As with many of her tech investments, Ms. Dyson approached health care mathematically. “The return on avoiding the destruction is so much greater than the return on fixing it later,” she says.

Part of a family of academics and scientists—her father is the physicist Freeman Dyson, and her brother is the science historian George Dyson —she has long taken an interest in basic research. Born in Zurich, Switzerland, Ms. Dyson grew up in Princeton, N.J. Her father was prominent in quantum field theory, and her mother is a philosopher and mathematician. Nobel Prize winners sometimes came to her family’s house for dinner. She started her own small newspaper on carbon copies at age 8 and enrolled at Harvard University at 16.

Ms. Dyson started her career as a fact-checker for Forbes and became a Wall Street analyst in 1977. She bought an equity research boutique in 1983 and sold it to CNET in 2004. She left the firm at the end of 2006 and is now chiefly an angel investor.

Ms. Dyson has long been interested in outer space and invested in Space Adventures, a private spaceflight company. In 2008, she spent six months living outside Moscow, where she paid to train as a backup cosmonaut for Charles Simonyi on his second private journey to the international space station. She wanted to learn about space but also to experience what was left of the Soviet era.

She now plans to make her inaugural trip into suborbital space within the next year, on a flight with XCOR Aerospace, another company in which she has invested.

Her investments in health-related companies have been diverse, including the genetics company 23andme and the mobile health company Voxiva. “People come to me with crazy ideas now,” she says. “I was always open to the more bizarre ones.” She credits her curiosity to her upbringing. “My dad became a scientist. I didn’t have the intellectual capacity or the patience to do that, but I’m still very curious,” she says. Her enthusiasm for the eccentric can lead to big bets on obscure ideas. “It’s weird. I’m much chintzier with \$25 than \$25,000,” she says.

She’s “producing” her own health, too. As she offers a piece of fruit from her office space’s produce-filled kitchen, she describes her typical weekday routine: swimming at 5:30 a.m., followed by a bike ride to work between 7 and 7:20. She has long been a proponent of self-tracking. In addition to her fitness band, she counts her emails each night as a measure of her stress levels.

As the founding chairman of the board of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, the body that sets policy for Internet names and addresses and performs other technical functions, she is also concerned about regulation of the Internet. Ms. Dyson has testified to congressional committees twice, once in defense of Iann while she was chairman in 1999 and once in criticism of its domain name expansion in 2011.

The U.S. Commerce Department recently said that it plans to relinquish its oversight of Iann, handing that task to an international body of some kind. The details are still being worked out, but Ms. Dyson hopes that governments won’t be the new regulators. “I don’t think the future of civilization is at stake,” she says, but “waste offends me, and stupidity like people getting sick who shouldn’t

offends me, and having someone muck up the Internet, which is running more or less OK, offends me.”

For now, she thinks there are many Silicon Valley Internet companies with inflated market values. “There is the desire to make money that motivates a lot of that in Silicon Valley, and yes, I think it’s totally a bubble,” she says. “It’s not like the last bubble in that there are a lot of real companies there [now], but there are a lot of unreal companies and...many of them will disappear.” She thinks too many people are starting similar companies. “You have people being CEOs of teeny little things who would be much better as marketing managers of someone else’s company,” she says.

And though her work often takes her to California, she’s happy to stay in New York. These days, she finds Silicon Valley “very fashionable,” she says, “and I don’t really like fashion.”

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