

The Dilbert Future in Retrospect

Subjectively marking XX comic predictions about the 21st Century written in the late 20th Century

Scott Adams, famous for the Dilbert cartoon strips for much of his career (then infamous, for... 'reasons' in the latter part of his career) died on [get date], aged 68 years. Back in the 1990s he was my father's favourite cartoonist (in a shortlist of one), and so, vicariously, he became my favourite cartoonist too.

Another Scot A. Scott Alexander, famous within the so-called 'Rationalist' community of the perennially overqualified, geeky, and under-employed [recently wrote a long piece][get link to article] discussing, amongst other things, the appeal of the Dilbert cartoons, their fit to 1980s and 1990s corporate norms in which people in nominally 'good' (white collar) jobs were expected to seek quiet consolation in cynicism (rather than quit), and how arguably Adams' tendency towards cynicism led to him valourising that paragon of cynicism, selfishness, and mass manipulation (or in Adams' term, 'mass persuasion'), Donald J Trump.

Alexander claims in the above piece that Adams feasted long on his one good prediction: that Trump would win the 2016 US Presidential election, at a time most pundits thought this possibility was vanishingly unlikely. Adams wrote around the time about Trump's almost magical ability to 'hyponitise' crowds of thousands, then tens of thousands, then millions, and Trump's very smart way with words. Far from Trump's ever simplifying vocabulary tendency to repetition being signs of declining cognitive capacity, Adams argued, they were instead indications of Trump's ever improving stagecraft, his ability to understand what does, and what does not, resonate effectively with his ever growing crowds of supporters. From Adams' perspective, Trump wasn't speaking like a petulant child because his brain was going to mush, but because this is what the crowd responded to best. Trump wasn't a simple bully, but a master of testing and crafting 'linguistic kill shots'. Trump wasn't rambling in his repetitive speech, he was 'weaving', hypnotising the masses, implanting ideas and frames, making the masses and mass media alike follow and parrot his agenda, even if (nominally) the mainstream media did so to criticise and take umbrage at his latest 'outburst'.

But Adams has had a long history of making 'predictions', even if many of these were so vague as to be unverifiable, and exaggerated for comic effect. In particular, in 1997 Adams wrote a book called 'The Dilbert Future', which contained over 60 such 'predictions' about the future. As from 1997's perspective, we're surely now living in the future, I thought maybe it would be good to look at these predictions, and see how well they stood up.

And then, like 'magic' (maybe like something that has been conjured into coincidence by something like the 'affirmations' Adams ended the book describing), I chanced upon a copy of The Dilbert Future a week ago at one of Edinburgh's free book exchanges. So I picked it up. Aside from a blue ink stain on one edge of the book, it was in good condition, meaning I could see and copy out all 65 of Adams' predictions from 1997.

Below are each of the predictions, written exactly as they were in the book. After each prediction I've put my immediate thoughts on each claim, in which I aimed to be charitable where possible in interpreting ambiguous statements in the most positive way possible, and to 'price in' any comic exaggerations in his wording, such that if his claims were pointing in the direction of a trend that's since come about, even if the precise claim is about such trends having by this point reached an illogical conclusion; I've tried to give him credit for at least being 'on trend'.

The predictions

Prediction 1: In the future, authors will take a long time to get to the point. That way the book looks thicker.

This both waxed and waned. Books that had simple and easily marketable messages, so were repetitive and padded, did become more popular. But then books themselves have become less popular. (At least non-fiction. Fiction loves taking a long time to get to the point.)

Prediction 2: In the future, you will wish I had never put the image in your head of me doing jumping jacks in an open kimono.

This follows Adams' long standing interest in and overegging of techniques for persuasion, including a tendency to describe a lot of manipulative behaviours as being some kind of hypnosis.

Prediction 3: On average, Individuals who are alive today will experience 80 years of complaint-free livin'. Unfortunately they'll live to 160.

It is true that for the last generation of so the gap between life expectancy and healthy life expectancy has grown.

Prediction 4: The people who are studying Tai Chi Chuan instead of saving money are planning to beat us up and take our stuff when we're retired.

This seems to be an insinuation that more conscientious and less open types will tend to be more right wing, and less conscientious and more open types (thinking OCEAN/Big Five) will tend to lean left wing

Prediction 5: The people who are alive today will appear grotesque to the perfectly engineered children of the future.

There are many memes about how (say) 35 year olds from the 80s look much older than 35 year olds from the 2010s and beyond. So though not genetic engineering there's maybe something here.

Prediction 6: In the future, we'll accelerated our successful practice of brainwashing children so they'll be nice to us while we plunder their planet.

There's maybe been more cultural enforcement of performative niceness. But this seems to be younger cohorts influencing themselves, not older cohorts intentionally and successfully influencing younger cohorts.

Prediction 7: Life in the future will *not* be like *Star Trek*.

Very true. Even Star Trek's no longer much like Star Trek.

Prediction 8: In the future, there will be a huge market for technology products that help workers goof off and still get paid.

True (but not huge). Especially with home working. For example devices that move mice and press keys on a keyboard so it looks like someone's at their keyboard, even if they're not.

Prediction 9: In the future, Internet capacity will increase indefinitely to keep up with the egos of the people using it. Cost will not be an issue.

Capacity and speed have continued to grow exponentially, such that it's largely become a water-like commodity.

Prediction 10: In the future, your clothes will be smarter than you.

Not clothes (water and electronics don't mix). But extend this to wearable tech and this is broadly correct.

Prediction 11: In the future, Network Computers will be purchased and used with the same enthusiasm as home exercise equipment.

Truish if I understand context. Smartphones made 'proper computer' use less common; hence the web becoming mobile first.

Prediction 12: In the future, ISDN services will improve to the point where you can mention it in a crowd without generating laughter.

If internet services, yes.

Prediction 13: In the future, we'll all use sophisticated Bozo Filters to prevent idiots from communicating with us.

Blocking, filters, algorithmic matching of content to feed people people they want to hear from and ideas they want to hear. Broadly true. This includes the shadowbanning on Twitter Adams complained about in the pre-Musk days (which in this sense makes him the bozo being filtered.)

Prediction 14: In the future, kids won't have access to online pornography, because the X-rated Internet sites will be clogged by horny adults who have more patience.

Self contradictory with other claims about increased capacity. Not happened I assume.

Prediction 15: In the future, technology will continue to make our lives harder and many of us will be delighted about it.

I have a broad sense this is true but it's so vague it's just a gut feeling that can neither be verified nor falsified.

Prediction 16: In the future, scientists will learn how to convert stupidity into clean fuel.

If eating deep fried food is stupid then I guess it's true in that oil from takeaways and restaurants are increasingly being used as biofuels.

Prediction 17: In the future, technology will become the leading cause of death.

Flip this: technologies may instead be the leading cause of poor, overextended lives spent in poor health and with low quality of life.

Prediction 18: In the future, computer-using men will be the sexiest males.

No.

Prediction 19: In the future, we'll realise that the creatures we thought were from other planets are actually smart people who live in Switzerland.

Nope.

Prediction 20: In the future, the trend of "personal services" will continue until busy people are handling almost none of their routine bodily functions themselves.

Exaggeration. But takeaway and delivery apps means there's less need for personal planning and many essential errands are now outsourced or outsourceable

Prediction 21: Lack of education will not be the biggest problem in the future. The problem will be an excess of stupidity as more people fall below the incompetence line

This feels true, but likely my prejudice. The share of young people going into further education has tended to increase, but arguably the quality and value of many courses that constitute much of the expansion has decreased.

Prediction 22: In the future, there will be a huge increase in the number of "household services" to compensate for the pathetic incompetence of the average person.

See prediction 20.

Prediction 23: Democracy and capitalism will continue to give the shaft to lazy and stupid people. Neither group will complain.

This is just a cynic's Shibolet.

Prediction 24: In the future, most democratic countries will be led by tall people with good hair and smart staff members.

I expect this is true (adjusting for changing sex composition in political office)

Prediction 25: In the future, the value of your vote will become less than zero. That happens when the amount you pay in taxes to have your own vote counted is less than the value you get from the vote itself.

See prediction 23.

Prediction 26: In the future, voters will be so baffled that they'll want smart people with bad hair to tell them what to do.

No. They'll prefer smart people with good hair, or settle on dumb people with good hair, before listening to smart people with bad hair. (However, they'll increasingly consider no hair to be good-enough hair.)

Prediction 27: In the future, scientists will create a powerful and legal aphrodisiac.

Semaglutides?

Prediction 28: In the future, women will run the world in all democratic countries.

An increasing trend, but a comic exaggeration.

Prediction 29: In the future, religious groups will get mad at me, thus boosting my book sales.

Depends on whether Adams would have considered 'The Woke' to be a (secular) religious group. Instead ironically the last few months of Adams' life involved a lot of support from Christians, leading to Adams' deathbed conversion because Pascal's Wager.

Prediction 30: Most scientific and technical breakthroughs in the next century will be created by men and directed at finding replacements for women.

Maybe an element of this but I don't think it's been the prime driver.

Prediction 31: In the future, skilled professionals will flee their corporate jobs and become their own bosses in ever-increasing numbers. They'll become entrepreneurs, consultants, contractors, prostitutes, and cartoonists.

There has been a marked increase in self employment and diversity of contractor services. There seem to have been both push and pull reasons for this.

Prediction 32: In the future, the balance of employment power will change. We'll witness the revenge of the downsized.

Maybe this hasn't happened so much as younger generations demanding different rules and conditions in employment - such as better work-life balance and improved mental health services - than earlier generations.

Prediction 33: In the future, highly qualified people will go on job interviews purely for recreation.

Not really. Getting a job interview has itself become a very effortful process. They're too rare and valuable to be treated recreationally.

Prediction 34: In the future, salaries will go down for people in medium-skilled jobs; thanks to the godforsaken hellhole called North Dakota.

Median wages have long been suppressed, and gone down in real terms due to inflation. But this isn't due to North Dakota.

Prediction 35: In the future, employees will either be superstars or perspiration wipers. Those who aren't qualified to do either will become managers.

In many roles the gaps between top and median outcomes seem to have increased.

Prediction 36: In the future, all work will be outsourced, until all the work on the planet is being done by one guy.

Much as been outsourced. But this is another trend that seems to have slowed down or reversed.

Prediction 37: In the future, more people will work for themselves, creating a huge market for bizarre products.

See the crap advertised on Facebook. And Gwyneth Paltrow.

Prediction 38: In the future, filthy, perverted hobos will refer to themselves as telecommuters, until someone points out they aren't being paid.

Self employment does make it easier to designate oneself as being someone else isn't getting routinely paid for longer.

Prediction 39: In the future, aggressive companies will replace standard cubicles with head cubicles.

Worse: open plan!

Prediction 40: In the future, your only choices for new project names will be ones that sound undignified.

Wrong. Project names can be just as bland as ever. Combinatorials do a lot of work.

Prediction 41: In the future, it will become increasingly obvious that your competitors are just as clueless as you are.

Only if you work across multiple competitors. Which given shorter tenures in any particular role is maybe more likely.

Prediction 42: In the future, all barriers to entry will go away and companies will be forced to form what I call "confusiopolies"

This was Adams' best genuine economic contribution. By making products incomparable and multi-factorial, standard market pressures fail to make products 'better' than each other, just different. This either creates more scope for personalisation of services for customers, or more ways for multiple companies to generate excess profits from consumed customers. What happened with mobile phone contracts seems almost perfectly predicted by the Confusiopolies concept.

Prediction 43: In the future, the science of advertising will improve to the point where buying what you see in an advertisement is no longer optional.

The nightmarish dream for tech companies has been to make advertising ever more targeted, personalised and subtle. At the extreme this becomes companies profiling customers so well they only present products they customers actually 'need', all the time.

Prediction 44: In the future, companies will make aggressive products that resist any attempt at refunds or cancellation while actively trying to take more of your money.

Definitely. Many online subscription services operate on the Hotel California Principle: easy to join (free month trial etc), very hard to leave (obscure cancellation options; more, effortful steps, then very charismatic salespeople as the final defence for anyone who wants to quit a service.)

Prediction 45: In the future, it will be easy to find customers who are gullible enough to buy any product, no matter how worthless and stupid it is.

See prediction 37

Prediction 46: In the future, the most important career skill will be a lack of ethics.

Especially POTUS and POTUSians?

Prediction 47: In the future, poverty will be eliminated, along with the people who are hoarding all the money.

No or not yet

Prediction 48: In the future, the age of consent for sex and liquor will be raised to 120.

No or not yet. Though social norms may be moving more in this direction.

Prediction 49: In the future, new technology will allow police to solve 100% of all crimes. The bad news is that we'll realize 100% of the population are criminals, including the police.

No. Maybe more so in China?

Prediction 50: In the future, more people will actively ignore the news because it is irrelevant.

More that more of the news that's being fed to people is algorithmically filtered, rather than something people choose to ignore. And much of it isn't news.

Prediction 51: In the future, the media will kill famous people to generate news that people will care about.

Fortunately not.

Prediction 52: In the future, everyone will be a news reporter.

Approximately true in the sense that anyone can record a breaking event if it happens to happen in front of them, with their phone. The issue is not means but inclination.

Prediction 53: In the future, the thing we'll miss most about the traditional "news media" will be the professional reporters asking penetrating questions

Largely true. Though I think Adams might have perceived the 'mainstream media' to have been somewhat self denestrating in these regards (as a Trump supporter)

Prediction 54: In the future, parents will have to pass a brief written parent test in order to get tax credits for dependents.

Only to the extent there is systemic underclaiming of benefits in many rich nations, much for reasons of finding forms confusing and unapproachable.

Predictions 55: In the future, it will be illegal to threaten yourself, and the penalty for doing so will be death.

No.

Prediction 56: In the future, assisted suicide will be a medical specialty practiced by doctors who don't like people.

It's not emerged as a specialty, and it's likely for people who don't like people to suffer unnecessarily, rather than don't like people. But assisted suicide has trended towards becoming more accessible over the last 29 years.

Prediction 57: In the future, there will be no compelling reason to invade anyone's privacy.

Not true. False.

Prediction 58: In the future, you'll hear the phrase, "I'll be right back. I gotta take a wicked withdrawal."

No. Though youth slang has continued to evolve and become unintelligible to older generations.

Prediction 59: In the future, there will be drive-through pet facilities

No.

Prediction 60: In the future, you will not need a supercomputer and a team of scientists in order to get good nutrition.

Possibly truish: both semaglutides and recognition that diets that 'flip the food pyramid' (high carbs, fat; low carbohydrates) may be healthy suggest there are now some more useful heuristics for eating more healthily.

Prediction 61: In the future, there will be so many new kinds of whales, we'll all be sick of looking at them.

No.

Prediction 62: Two things that will never improve in the future are airlines and bicycle seats.

Take the Concorde: commercial flights have become slower at least. We passed the peak on this dimension.

Prediction 63: The theory of evolution will be scientifically debunked in your lifetime.

No.

Prediction 64: The next 100 years will be a search for better perception instead of better vision.

Let's hope.

Prediction 65: In the future, science will gradually free us from the optical illusions that restrict our view of reality.

As with 64 this is Adams' softening up the reader to his woo. (How to perform affirmations then follows)

So, how did 1997 Adams do? I think somewhat mixed, though he definitely seemed to be broadly correct on the way the internet would change both work and society. As you can see, most of the claims aren't precise enough to be wrong. But they do still seem largely to point at a direction of travel, which over the last 29 years has largely come about.