

London Futurist Shares Tech Secrets That Will Boost Your Portfolio

Retrieved Monday 23rd of October 2017 08:56:33 PM

The future is a mysterious place. While it's pretty obvious how mass-market technology will unfold over the next five years, it's much harder to look five decades a. Five years will bring us more solar panels, but 50 years may bring us fusion.

If you want your portfolio to achieve stellar long-term returns, it's critical to ensure that you're taking the long-term future into account. But can this prediction process ever really produce anything better than guesswork? Are self-proclaimed futurists more than glorified horoscope soothsayers or gee-whiz pundits? To find out, today I'm talking to David Wood, the chair of London Futurists. It's a public Meetup group, which anyone can join.

AL: Hi David. Let's start with the question, what is London Futurists?

DW: It's a Meetup organisation with over 5,000 members. The core of our activities is a series of public events that have been running in London since March 2008. We've had well over 100 meetings in that time. Our stated mission is "Serious analysis of radical scenarios for the next 3-40 years". My hope is to improve the calibre of the overall public discussion about the future. We need more people thinking hard about the future, and using better tools to help them in that process.

AL: How did you get into this field?

DW: My background is 25 years in the mobile computing and smartphone industry, providing software for companies such as Nokia, Sony Ericsson, Motorola, Samsung and – earlier – Psion, the pioneering UK-based PDA manufacturer. I saw that smartphones changed *enormously* over that time. The most important thing about smartphones is if they can make their human users smarter – more informed, more connected, more engaged, and so on. As far back as the 1990s I realised that these devices would one day drastically transform healthcare and education. Well, looking forward from the present day into the future, I see that smartphones are just the beginning. There are numerous other technologies that could change human experience even more profoundly.

AL: And that led you to create London Futurists?

DW: Yes. I saw that the stakes were high. I don't mean *financially* high, but *existentially* high. There are risks that humanity will collectively sleepwalk into a dystopian future whose dangers we failed to properly anticipate. There are also some profoundly interesting opportunities a, which could lead humanity, if we spot them in sufficient time and are sufficiently agile, into what would be a very positive future.

AL: You talk about "radical scenarios". What kind of things do you mean?

DW: The main driver for the transformations a – whether leading to potential disaster or potential triumph – is fast-changing technology. Every day brings a fresh wave of internet news reports about apparent breakthroughs by scientists and engineers. These reports highlight accelerating progress in numerous areas of technology which are collectively known as "NBIC". That covers fields such as atomic-level manufacturing ("N" – nanotechnology), genetic analysis and synthesis ("B" – biotechnology), mass data processing ("I" – information technology) and brain enhancement ("C" – cognitive technology). If you reflect on these trends, you'll see the possible imminent creation of new types of machines, new types of lifeforms, new types of algorithms and new types of minds.

AL: Where might some of these trends take us?

DW: Here are some possibilities. The robots and software that we humans are creating may take over more and more of the tasks from which we used to earn our living. Technological unemployment might soon be upon us, at an unprecedented scale. In that case, we must develop new social systems that provide our essential needs even in the absence of us earning an income. We must also learn to find our purpose in roles other than paid employment.

Going further, new forms of artificial intelligence may quickly become far cleverer than native humans, potentially relegating us to the status of the *second* most intelligent species on the planet, languishing behind new superintelligences. On the other hand, if we humans can absorb technology inside our bodies and brains, in the right way – if, that is, we can successfully *merge* with technology – then the threat of displacement may recede. Instead of being subordinated to artificial superintelligences, we humans might become superhumans, retaining control of our own destiny.

These modifications of our bodies and brains may extend further than just making us stronger and smarter: they might alter our fundamental character. In other words, we may soon have increased power, not only to alter nature, but to alter *human nature*. Rather than continuing to be driven by our present, biologically grounded desires and hopes, we'll have the opportunity to *deeply rewire our brains* so we are driven by new sets of desires and hopes. We'll have to face the question, not just "What do we want?" but "What do we want to want?"

AL: These are big questions. What would you pick as the most shocking scenario to consider?

DW: Perhaps most shocking of all, we may gain the ability to reverse and even abolish ageing.

It's my carefully considered view that, within 25 years – that is, by around the year 2040 – science may have placed into our hands the means to radically extend human longevity. *If we want to*, we could live indefinitely youthfully. A suite of rejuvenation treatments, administered regularly, could periodically undo the accumulated damage of ageing in both body and brain. As a result, life expectancy will shoot upwards. Not long afterward, more and more people will start sailing past the current world record for the longest verified human lifespan – a record held, as best as researchers can determine, by Frenchwoman Jeanne Louise Calment, who lived for 122 years and 164 days (1875 to 1997).

AL: Are you sure that would that be a good outcome?

DW: To be clear, these new heights of longevity would be achieved, not by extending the period of enfeeblement and decrepitude at the end of someone's life, but by keeping people healthy and invigorated for as long as each person chooses. This would be the extension, not just of lifespan, but of healthspan. Moreover, as years pass, quality of life would progressively improve. At the chronological age of 60, someone might be more resilient, more capable and more energised than when they were 50. By the time they reach 70, they might be every bit as healthy as when they were 30. And, moreover, a lot wiser.

AL: How might this transformation take place?

DW: The route to the abolition of ageing will see preventive and regenerative medicine grow to become the largest industry in history. Major branches of this giga-industry will include genomics, 3D-printed replacement organs, and nanomedicine – all tightly supported by deep machine learning.

Done right, this transformation would have enormous benefits for global finances. Smart, focused investment on preventive and regenerative medicines will bring about huge reductions in the healthcare expenditure that is currently consumed in the latter years of someone's life, as they suffer from an accelerating spiral of comorbidities. Demographers talk about a forthcoming "longevity dividend". A more homely expression is "a stitch in time saves nine".

This transformation would also address what is arguably the biggest, most terrible inequality of all – between those who remain alive, and those who fall victim to ageing and death and who therefore lose all opportunities for further growth, experience and community.

AL: What kind of reactions do your ideas generate?

DW: As a futurist, when I talk to audiences about the implications of accelerating technology, I'm used to witnessing some powerful reactions. Some of these reactions are intensely positive: "Wow, that would be awesome; I love it." Others are intensely negative: "Yuk, that would be awful; I hate it." Both sets of reaction – the excitement and the distress – are varieties of future shock.

One of my tasks, therefore, is to ease people beyond future shock. Our assessment of radical possible future scenarios should be guided, I say, not just by our initial emotional reaction, but by the kind of careful thought that is possible only once these strong emotions are, at least temporarily, set aside.

Our untutored gut reactions to hearing about an unexpected future scenario are liable to lead us astray – *badly* astray. The evaluative principles which served us well in the past may lose their applicability in the very different circumstances that could exist in the future. So as a futurist, I ask audiences: let's avoid rushing to judgement. Let's be ready to free ourselves from the assumptions of the past. Let's be vigilant, against wishful thinking, and also against any overdose of cynicism. Let's be ready to conceive the full potential of new scenarios, so we can see more clearly both the upsides and the downsides they bring.

AL: What's your personal track record in predictions? Is it better than raw chance?

DW: I've documented many of the ups and downs of the smartphone industry in my 2014 book *Smartphones and beyond*. That contains lots of examples of things I was able to foresee and influence, as well, to be frank, of things that I failed to influence. There are also archive copies of my predictions from 2001-2006 on my corporate website, Delta Wisdom. For more recent predictions, there's my personal blog, dw2.

AL: If people want to dip more fully into your thinking, where should they look?

DW: My most recent book is *The Abolition of Aging: The forthcoming radical extension of healthy human longevity*. It expands on the points we've covered in this discussion.

AL: Thank you for a fascinating discussion!

DW: It's been a pleasure. If it has encouraged readers to pay more attention to the discipline of futurism, it will have increased the chance of us collectively reaching a positive future rather than a new dark age.

Well, that's one of the most radical and far-reaching interviews we've ever had in *Exponential Investor*. I hope it's made you think more deeply about the issues involved. Please do send your thoughts on far-future issues to andrew@southbankresearch.com.

Best,

