



Book Future Files

A Brief History of the Next 50 Years

Richard Watson
Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2008
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Recommendation

In this bold, entertaining book, futurist Richard Watson reports the results of decades of thought about the future. He identifies more than 200 separate trends, which he helpfully winnows down into five overarching themes illustrated with real-world and hypothetical examples. His breezy style weaves these themes into the major areas of life: work, finances, politics, science, health care and entertainment, among others. Watson’s vision of the future covers all aspects – literally everything from taking baths to artificial intelligence – and the sweep of his ambition is impressive. He augments his text with good graphics, some perhaps tongue-in-cheek (his ‘Extinction Timeline’ has Belgium biting the bullet around 2049). The book’s one weakness is that, while Watson tells readers what will happen in the future, he doesn’t always explain why. This caveat aside, *BooksInShort* recommends this engaging book to leaders, innovators and all those interested in the future.

Take-Aways

- Five major trends will “shape the next 50 years.”
- The first is demographic – much of the world’s population is aging.
- The second is political – power will shift from the West to the East.
- The third is about connectivity, which will continue to unite the globe.
- The fourth is environmental – climate change and global warming are only the beginning.
- The fifth involves four technologies – “Genetics, Robotics, Internet and Nanotechnology” (GRIN) – that will enhance human capacity.
- Lifestyles will polarize: As some people embrace high-tech, others will go retro.
- Some people will retreat into virtual worlds and private media to avoid being overwhelmed by the future’s faster pace and increased stress.
- Jobs will move, industries will invade foreign markets, ideas will spread widely and many people will telecommute as “localization” will oppose globalization.
- Some things won’t change, including the human desire for “recognition and respect.”

Summary

Future Planning

Forecasting the future is impossible; making specific predictions, absurd. However, to learn all you can and plan for change, you must look beyond the limits of your discipline and short-term goals. Consider a broad host of factors, and let your forecasting influence your present.

“So is the aim of this book to predict the future? Yes and no. Anyone who says they can do this is either a liar or a fool. My intention is simply to

reinterpret the present.”

Five trends will “shape the next 50 years.” First, much of the industrialized world’s population is getting older. Second, political and economic power will move from the West to the East, and military power will follow. Third, “global connectivity” will continue: More people will go online, and economies will become more interwoven. Fourth, a quartet of technologies – “Genetics, Robotics, Internet and Nanotechnology” (GRIN) – will create “self-replicating machines,” artificial intelligence and genetically modified people. All these trends will interact with the fifth trend, the increasing importance of ecological concerns.

How Lives Will Change

Though broad trends will sweep across the globe, people will not lead uniform lives. Instead, they will inhabit “multiple futures.” Societies will polarize, pulling people in opposite directions. Globalization will spread; ideas and products will flow everywhere. “Localization,” the countertrend to globalization, will signal a “new tribalism” in which people will seek identity in their local communities, regions and nations.

“The future is an either/or kind of place, with most things polarizing in some form or another.”

The frenetic pace of the future will make many feel anxious and overwhelmed. They will suffer from “too much information” (TMI) and “too much choice” (TMC). More individuals will live alone due to easier divorces, longer life spans and lower birthrates, so they will indulge in more electronic entertainment and networking. Online, nothing will be “neutral.” Websites will have their own personalities and will adapt to you. Pushback is inevitable, so many people will seek older, simpler technologies, familiar sequels and safer virtual worlds.

“The more life becomes virtual and high-tech, the more people will crave the opposite: low-tech, high-touch.”

Environmental concerns will affect transportation. Shrinking oil reserves and looming climate change will force the auto industry toward alternatives such as “small electric and hybrid vehicles.” Cars will also get smarter: They’ll check your pulse, turn on using “fingerprint and iris recognition” and even drive themselves. What’s more, auto-monitoring technologies will provide black-box data on accidents, occupants and driving routes. As the world gets more crowded, people will share cars, renting them as needed rather than owning them, and they’ll use public transportation more.

“Whether or not globalization ultimately remains a sustainable trend, nationalism will certainly be a feature of the next 50 years.”

The political landscape will change as power shifts eastward, especially to China. Widening divides between the rich and the poor will promote enclave living, and large urban areas may devolve to the “feral” poor. Water shortages will push nations to war. Advances in genetic technology will help scientists predict criminal tendencies, and DNA samples stored in national databases will allow governments to track individuals’ movements. Combine these advances with the fear of terrorism and general anxiety about change, and the result is lots more stress. People will deal with it by retreating into polarized worldviews; they’ll elect politicians who cater to their local, specific issues, not necessarily the best candidates for the bigger picture.

“In the future, thanks to the acceleration of technology, we will be busier and have less spare time.”

A nervous populace will handle more personal needs online, like shopping, learning and voting, rather than interact with others. Some will opt to stay home even for vacation, choosing to retreat into ever more elaborate virtual worlds. Others will travel more, and as the East continues to industrialize, its tourists will join those from the West. As a result, all the great historical sites and natural wonders will have waiting lists, and remote locations will become more popular as getaways. With the world increasingly linked, you’ll be able to forward your choices of food, ambiance and lodging electronically, so your hotels will be ready with rooms and menus organized to your liking.

“The history of human civilization is, to a large degree, the history of technology of one kind or another.”

Dichotomies will also show up in the future of food. On the one hand, life’s increased pace will lead many people to prize speed and convenience. Food will increasingly arrive pre-packaged, “pre-washed and pre-cut,” and you’ll be able to buy it faster due to electronic labeling. You will know more about your food, because tracking technologies will trace it from the farm to the plate. On the other hand, as part of society’s pushback against technology, you’ll seek “locally grown food” as well as “comfort food” that reminds you of simpler times. Some restaurants will move away from offering numerous choices to narrowing their selections: They’ll choose for you.

“In the future, we will all drive cars that fly. Fifty years ago that’s what most people thought we’d all be doing today.”

Technological and scientific advancements will lead to genetically modified crops, as well as “farmaceuticals” and “nutraceuticals”: foods adapted to include extra nutrition, medications or biochemical additives tailored to your genetic makeup. These enhancements will mean that your diet will dictate your insurance and link to your computerized medical records. You will calculate your taxes based on the energy costs of your food.

How Money and Work Will Change

People’s desire for convenience is going to change the financial industry. “Digital cash” will make purchases easier and faster than credit cards. You will pay for purchases up front and from anywhere, using a great variety of mechanisms, from phones to cars. All your gear will hold digital cash, as cellphones already do in Japan and South Korea. Competition will squeeze banks – with digitally enabled venues like PayPal and Zopa on one side, and retail giants like Wal-Mart offering a wider range of financial services on the other. People, companies and nations will all wrestle with the moral implications of debt, as changing economic conditions and generations redefine its meaning. The more complex your world, the more you’ll call upon expert “intermediaries” and seek “transparency” in professionals and corporations. Regulations will multiply as people try to secure their financial lives. The world’s economies will grow more intimately intertwined, and in new ways: Virtual worlds will create new markets in which to transfer money and labor.

“We can bank online, bet online, date online and watch television online, so why can’t we all vote online? In the future, we will.”

Several broad trends will shape retail marketing, which will face the polarization of “luxury versus low cost” customers. This market fragmentation means that those who buy the cheapest item in one category may shop for high-end specialties in another. Because life keeps speeding up, people will spend money on “sleep retail”: from expensive mattresses to biochemical sleep aids to technologies that let you learn while you snooze. No matter what you buy, you’ll want to shop faster and more easily. Retail outlets will cater to seniors and people living alone. They’ll also reflect environmental concerns: People will look for “sustainability” and “fair-trade” products that use minimal packaging and travel as few “food-miles” as possible. Packaging will list all this information, which will be part of a general push for greater corporate “authenticity.” As the world becomes more virtual, people will respond to businesses that articulate “realness.”

“Strangely, something else we’ll see in the future is less choice.”

The nature of work will change. The universal connectivity that grants you flexibility in where you live and work also enables your employer to monitor employees and to transfer jobs anywhere in the world. Your position may move to another country, and you may have to follow if you want to keep it. You may choose not to, though, because employee loyalty will continue to dwindle. Demographic changes mean labor shortages (Gen Y will enjoy tremendous leverage with employers). To lure workers, firms will have to focus on recruitment and greater “corporate social responsibility.”

How Entertainment Will Change

Technology will shape trends in entertainment. Because you’ll have less time, you’ll want faster, easier access to amusement, and you’ll want it your way. That might mean in shorter bursts, to accommodate your accelerated schedule, or it might mean instant availability, so all media will become “on demand,” like videos or podcasts. Despite the seemingly endless flood of free electronic content, you’ll pay for anything in limited supply: in-person performances, specialized productions, and so on. The current wave of “user-generated content” will continue to explode.

“Machines will be a dominant feature of the future. Computers will eventually become more intelligent than people, at which point humanity will be faced with something of a dilemma.”

The intersection of these trends will force changes in media funding models. Subscriptions will survive, but they’ll be joined by more display advertising, free publications supported by paid classifieds and simply free content. The price of creating video will drop, and people will be awash in a sea of films, clips, blogs, texts and less easily classified productions. Books will endure – in physical form as well as electronically – but the American movie industry will be in serious box office trouble, due to rising production costs and global competition (think Bollywood).

Scientific Developments and Change

Society determines how far science can move forward. Specifically, biotechnology will produce new foods, creatures and tools. Genetics will allow you to manage your health better, even foretelling specific illnesses long before any physical symptoms appear. The “emotionally aware machines” of science fiction will become a reality, as will a range of simpler robots. In general, machines will be more fully integrated into all aspects of life. Computers will make increasingly accurate predictions in many areas. Nanotechnology will cut across all industries, enabling synergistic change. For example, minutely small sensors will be everywhere, allowing continual global monitoring and reducing the threat of accidents or even of getting lost. Individuals will use these technologies to retrieve elusive memories. Groups will create knowledge and truth in new ways: Wikipedia is a harbinger. Ethical and political concerns will attempt to put a brake on scientific progress, but won’t succeed until some technological disaster happens.

“The supply of content will become effectively infinite.”

Science will advance over the next 50 years in response to future needs. For example, an aging population will fund more studies of elder care, biochemical memory aids and organ transplants. Research into memory restoration, ostensibly to fight Alzheimer’s disease, will develop a way for you to erase recent painful memories. Hospital costs will continue to climb, thus spawning advances in telemedicine and distance monitoring technologies.

“Do you want to live for ever? How about to 130? That’s not too far-fetched.”

Scientific progress will also drive change in disturbing directions: “Computers will become more intelligent than people by about 2030.” Futuristic thinkers, such as Ray Kurzweil, argue that you’ll soon see a “singularity,” the point at which machines evolve past human understanding. Then, they will become “self-replicating,” able to reproduce and continually upgrade their capacities. Though that outcome is debatable, you will see robot soldiers, emotional machines and an ever-advancing – and progressively more integrated – augmentation of the human mind via machine.

Planning for the Future – and What Won’t Change

Many scenarios about what might happen in the future are flatly terrifying. If you consider these “worst-case scenarios” inevitable, you’ll end up cowering under your bed. However, while you shouldn’t ignore possible future threats – or current dark realities, like the AIDS epidemic – you also shouldn’t let other people’s fears cloud your vision of what the world can be. After all, you live in a world where the air “is in many instances cleaner than it was 100 years ago,” and where many types of crime have dropped markedly. Optimism is not just an option. In many ways, it is the more realistic (if difficult) choice.

“The future will not be a singular experience and neither is it a foregone conclusion.”

Nevertheless, change happens. Assume that, no matter what you do, technology will play a larger role in your life. Anticipate a reaction against this expansion: Many corporate decisions will entail “high-tech” versus “high-touch” trade-offs. Expect people to become more isolated and the population to keep aging. Accept that the question of sustainability will loom larger as time passes and resources diminish. However, despite all this, some things won’t change: People will continue to search for meaning in their lives, and will crave “recognition and respect” from others. Despite virtual options, people always will want “physical objects, actual encounters and live experiences.” People will still fear change and long for a simpler past, even as they embrace the future.

About the Author

Richard Watson is a futurist for the Future Exploration Network, and author and publisher of the quarterly *What's Next*.
