

Preface

Taming the Future

Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the face.

Mike Tyson

The future casts a long shadow — in my case, way back to Australia in 2006 when I was asked to write a book called *Future Files* about where I thought the world was heading over the next 50 years. But the future was always an excuse, used more as a distorting mirror than a crystal ball. What I was interested in then, and remain interested in today, is people and how they respond to new ideas and events.

Also, how we relate and respond to *each other*, which is what this book is about. It is peoples' lives, their deepest dreams, what they believe in, and what they are most afraid of that captivates me, not the latest ephemeral gadget or app, although these things can, and do, influence us, too.

Future Files must have hit a nerve, because the book ended up being published in 15 languages. One reason was timing — there hadn't been a book about the distant future for a very long time. But I was also lucky with my thinking. I wrote then that debt levels were unsustainable and that a systemic shock to the financial system was inevitable. This was 'not a debt mountain; it's an avalanche waiting to descend ... Big banks, in particular, will come under increasing scrutiny about their lending practices, and there will be calls for salary and profit caps ...'

There's nothing like a page of prophecy to sell some books, although I'm still waiting patiently for the European Union to 'splinter and ultimately collapse', and for the day when 'women with facial lines will be highly desirable'. It seems that I made the mistake of thinking we'd tire of forced unions and pixelated perfection, but evidently we haven't. Nor have we grown tired of debt — in which case, I suspect that history will soon repeat itself, in the form of another major financial crash.

But the main reason the book sold well was due to an emerging epidemic of anxiety and insecurity. The world was changing, and readers were seeking a narrative

that explained where things were going. The book provided a comforting cloak of reassurance to those grieving the loss of an imagined future.

The distant future had once been hopeful and at times rather fun. It had been a preview of coming attractions. But by late 2007, people had given up hope of seeing flying cars or owning personal jetpacks. All anyone wanted to know was whether everything would turn out alright. Would there be a comforting resolution after the explosive opening sequence? Would computer-generated special effects continue to enthral us, or would the computer move from all-conquering hero to sinister villain lurking behind our flickering screens?

This dystopian discomfort was likely linked to a feeling that things had got out of control. Events were unfolding too fast for most people to comprehend. Gone were the days when you could start a broken-down car by yourself or understand how a camera worked. Even by 2007, it wasn't just credit default swaps or 'additionality' linked to carbon credits that were incomprehensible — you almost needed a degree in complex-systems theory simply to switch on a domestic washing machine. Seriously, do we really need 40-plus washing choices, including the incomprehensible option to wash your clothes later?

Complexity, synonymous in engineering terms with instability, had become a hallmark of the early 21st century, and the world's axis had shifted towards the outskirts of normal. This was unsettling, especially to anyone brought up in an analog, Western-centric world where globalisation had meant Americanisation and *cheap* washing machines.

There have always been generational waves of future fatigue. Permit me to restate in full the observation by Douglas Adams:

Everything that's already in the world when you're born is just normal; anything that gets invented between then and before you turn thirty is incredibly exciting and creative; anything that gets invented after you're thirty is against the natural order of things and the beginning of the end of civilisation as we know it until it's been around for about ten years when it gradually turns out to be alright really.

Yet this time, the dismay was different. Sometime after the Millennium (probably

after the explosive events of 9/11 or, slightly earlier, after the premature death of Douglas Adams) the future became obscured. The dream that we once called ‘the future’ soured, and its shadow became awkward and indistinct. But even then, this wasn’t true for everyone. How one imagines and responds to the future has always depended on who and where you are. The future is always a mental construct generally projected from things that have been recently experienced.

In large parts of Asia and Africa, rapidly rising incomes and opportunities meant that optimism was in the ascendant, while across swathes of the United States and Europe, declining real incomes meant that it was doom and gloom that was often projected forwards. Nevertheless, by 2008 the US financial crisis that had started with people lending and borrowing too much money had become a global problem, creating a vortex into which many age-old certainties were sucked.

If we had been able to better remember the past and not overreact to the present, we might have been alright. If the crisis had occurred much earlier, ignorance may have remained bliss. There was once less information, and both people and money were less connected, which meant fewer systemic risks.

A study conducted by Angelika Dimoka, director of the Centre for Neural Decision Making at Temple University in the US, found that as information is increased, so too is activity in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, a region of the brain associated with decision-making and the control of emotions. Yet eventually, activity in this region falls off. The reason for this is that part of our brain has essentially left the building. When incoming information reaches a tipping point, the brain protects itself by shutting down certain functions. Key outcomes include a tendency for anxiety and stress levels to soar and for people to abstain from making important decisions.

Fast-forward a few years, and some e-vangelists started looking at the world through Google Glass and other augmented-reality devices. Meanwhile, others, a majority perhaps, put on rose-tinted spectacles and framed their gaze firmly backwards. On the fringes, some squinted scornfully and aspired toward self-loathing and obliteration. Yet others suggested that the very idea of human progress had become impoverished. Maybe they had a point, but there was no redemptive framework in sight.

What this amounts to is a clash between those racing toward the future and others

fleeing from it. A similar tension between faith and scepticism plays out between Islamic fundamentalism and liberal agnosticism. Some fundamentalists would like to reinstate a seventh-century legal framework, while many online libertarians would like to escape legal constraints altogether.

Western self-loathing remains an especially odd development. On most measures that matter — life expectancy, infant mortality, literacy, extreme poverty, hunger, the number of women in education and employment — life has never been better for most people on the planet. If you doubt this, you have clearly not been paying attention.

But despite the good news about the expansion of the global middle class, the electrification of Africa, or survival rates for cancer, we focus instead on doomsday forecasts about rogue asteroids, global pandemics, and employment-eating robots. These — along with climate change, obesity, resource depletion, falling biodiversity, bioterrorism, and pollution — are serious problems, but I'd suggest that they are generally focal points for deeper anxieties and are unlikely to be terminal for the human race.

So why are we feeling so miserable when there's so little to feel miserable about?

Prior to 9/11 (or the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 or the financial crisis of 2008 or ... take your pick), people believed that they had a clear view of what lay ahead. With 20/20 hindsight, it's clear that such views were delusional. Yet the detail was irrelevant. At least people had a sense of direction, from which they could construct a narrative to make sense of things. For many people, life was hard, but they knew where they stood, which is why countries such as Russia now long to go backwards and reconstruct previous certainties along with territorial borders.

Today, many people feel that the future has evaporated or they are held hostage by some unknowable and uncontrollable force. This is, however, nonsense. Firstly, certain elements of the future are predetermined. Demographics retain a high degree of certainty, while geography and geology impose a number of constraints. Parts of the future can therefore be found on the flood plains and tributaries of history. Secondly, the collective psychology of nations, influenced again by the past, can suggest a sense of direction.

Thirdly, there's technology. It's true that technology is neutral — but only if you

take humans out of the equation. It is the nexus of human history, human nature, and what many regard as increasingly inhuman technologies where I'd expect the largest tensions to bubble up over the years ahead, especially as we struggle to adapt our slowly evolving monkey brains to the rapidly changing technological landscape.

These thoughts were on my radar in 2006 when I wrote that 'to a large degree, the history of the next 50 years will be about the relationship between technology and people', yet I now believe that I underplayed the significance of this statement.

This is odd, because it's a point well made by Alvin and Heidi Toffler in *Future Shock*, published in 1970, of which I have a well-thumbed copy. Their book argued that the *perception* of too much change over too short a period of time would create psychological problems and mental instability at both an individual and societal level.

You might argue that they were wrong (it didn't happen) or that they were right but that they got their timing very wrong (futurologists often use the line 'give it time' in relation to suspect forecasts). One might also speculate about who gets listened to and what gets believed and why, however this isn't the time or place.

Personally, I think that the Tofflers anticipated something of significance, and if my book had a dramatic chase scene, this would be it — our desire for change and renewal crashing up against our need for permanence and stability. Will we be forced to adapt to new technologies and global norms, or will we insist that new technologies adapt to us, deleting, controlling, and escaping them as necessary?

How, for instance, should technology serve humanity, and what, ultimately, is its purpose? Should all forms of automation and artificial intelligence (AI) be made to exist within an agreed moral framework, and where, if anywhere, should the line be drawn in relation to what humans and machines are permitted to do? Should humans and machines be allowed to merge, creating augmented, partially synthetic, or cybernetically hybridised humans, and, if so, where would this leave any remaining unchanged homo sapiens?

Whatever happens, we should never lose faith, because the future is always wide open. The future is shaped by the choices that we make, and these choices can always be challenged and changed, even at the last minute.

In one sense, the problem we currently face is not technology, it's humans — but more about us later. One thing we should certainly do is worry less about what might

happen over the coming decades and focus far more on what it is that we, as individuals and institutions, want to happen. And it isn't necessarily logic that will help us to shape this. Rather, it will be our deepest hopes and our darkest fears.

The aim of this book is not precise prediction, but rough illustration. It is a critique of how we live now and a discussion about how we might wish to live next. It is about who we are and where we are going and about the need for human beings to remain central to any new digital interests or perspectives.

Hopefully, the shadow cast by the future will henceforth be our own and will provide a degree of comfort rather than bewilderment.