BY JIM CARROLL



Future follies

GIVEN HOW LONG WE'VE BEEN MAKING PREDICTIONS, WHY CAN'T WE GET IT RIGHT?

We are in the last month of the last year of the last century of an entire millennium – and we are surrounded by predictions. Should you believe them? Maybe not: you might instead heed the words of poet Paul Valéry, who stated (in translation) that "the trouble with our times is that the future is not what it used to be." In other words, humankind doesn't have a great track record in predicting the future. ▸

ILLUSTRATION: TRACEY WOOD

YESTERDAY

Consider, for example, the 1868 prediction that residents of London, England, would face a very serious problem within 100 years, because most of the city would be buried six feet deep in horse manure! Of course, we now know that this was quite wrong, and we can chuckle at the folly of the man who uttered those words.

Yet we can also learn from his error, by understanding how he came to be so far off the mark. He had looked at the population growth rate of the city and factored in the bathroom habits of horses. The conclusion seemed obvious – at least, as long as no one considered the possibility that horses might be replaced as the primary means of transportation.

There are different categories of incorrect predictions. First come the ones made by people like the gentleman in the example above, who are convinced that the world around them isn't going to change, or, if it does, that new inventions won't have much impact.

Take the memo circulated within Western Union in 1876, stating that "the telephone has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication." Or the 1899 statement by British scientist William Thomson (Lord Kelvin) that "Heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible. X-rays will prove to be a hoax." Or the Boeing engineer who commented, after the first flight of the 247 (with a passenger capacity of 10 people), that "there will never be a bigger plane built." And then there was an inventor called Lee De Forest, who suggested that "while theoretically and technically television may be feasible, commercially and financially it is an impossibility."

Perhaps the most boneheaded prediction of this type was made in 1946 by Darryl F. Zanuck, then head of 20th Century-Fox Studios, who stated that TV "won't be able to hold onto any market it captures after the first six months. People will soon get tired of staring at a plywood box every night."

The second category of erroneous predictions contains the statements made by people who are convinced that the world about them – far from never changing – will change totally. As a result, their predictions are so fantastic that they don't come true. In 1955, the *New York Times* quoted one individual who suggested that nuclear-powered vacuum cleaners would be available within 10 years. In the 1960s, a *Newsweek* article about the home of the future featured a housewife taking an ultrasonic shower – sound waves did the cleaning! It also suggested that there would soon be a machine that would automatically make beds.

The third category consists of what we might call "replacement predictions,"

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in which it is assumed that a new technology will simply replace something else. Back in the 1800s and early 1900s, experts suggested that photography would replace painting, since the quality would be so much better. When television came out in the 1950s, many predicted that the radio industry was doomed. In the 1970s, VCRs were going to make movie theatres obsolete. Just a few years ago, people suggested that the Internet would replace newspapers. None of these things has happened.

The list of failed predictions goes on an on. The fact is, making predictions is very difficult. Even the most brilliant people don't always succeed: in 1932, Albert Einstein stated that "there is not the slightest indication that nuclear energy will ever be obtainable. It would mean that the atom would have to be shattered at will."

TODAY

Today, we are surrounded by predictions about the century and millennium to come. Read a newspaper, open a magazine, watch TV or attend a conference, and you'll be inundated with material from experts who purport to tell you what will happen in the 21st century.

By fall of this year, the millennium-prediction industry was in high gear. *Business Week* headlined "A Look At Things To Come," with "21 Ideas for the 21st Century." *AsiaWeek* featured "Countdown: Twenty Trends Recasting Asia," while *Newsday* published "21 Inventions for the Next Century." The *Los Angeles Times* weighed in with its "Special Millennium Issue." *Maclean's* ran its own "Peering into the future" article, in which it tracked "the trends that will mark the closing months of the millennium." At least it had the humility to note that "divining the future is tricky at the best of times...."

TOMORROW

What can we learn from the fact that our past is sprinkled with so many incorrect predictions?

It is this: we should be wary of many predictions and take them with a grain of salt. We need to approach them with a sense of judicious, cautious skepticism, in which we seek further, supporting evidence (from other sources) for any statement being made. Most important, we should analyze each prediction in light of the affiliations and interests of the person who is making it.

Does this mean we shouldn't listen to what is being said? Not at all: it seems to be a basic human trait to want to know what will happen next. It's just that we need to develop an ability to carefully and critically assess all the predictions that come our way.

Charles Franklin Kettering once suggested that "we should all be concerned about the future because we will have to spend the rest of our lives there." Rightly so – but let's also be cautious. ■

Jim Carroll dares to make his own predictions about the future in his newest book, *Light Bulbs to Yottabits: How to Profit by Understanding the Internet of 2005.*

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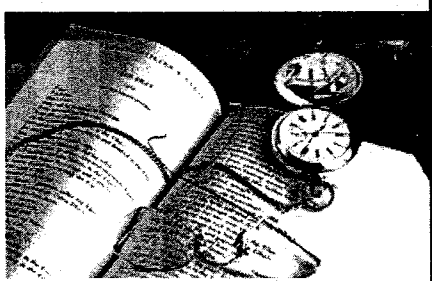

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