

Technology predictions gone wrong

A red rectangular graphic with the text 'WEEKLY LEARNINGS 2023' in white. The word 'WEEKLY' is in a bold, sans-serif font, 'LEARNINGS' is in a larger, bold, sans-serif font, and '2023' is in a large, elegant, cursive script. Above the text, there are several lightbulbs of varying sizes, some with lines radiating from them, suggesting ideas or innovation.

WEEKLY LEARNINGS 2023

Weekly Learnings 20 / 2023

There are a lot of predictions regarding the future of technology and its impact on jobs, skills etc. I looked at the many technology predictions that have gone wrong as a fun learning article. As the adage goes “Predicting the future is easy, getting it right is difficult.”

1. Most tech predictions are wrong because people do not see the issues involved, some could be regulatory, some technical and some related to possible innovations down the line. Being conditioned to what we have seen before is possibly the reason for poor predictions.
2. When the Wright Brothers made their first flight, there were many predictions about single-person aircraft flights. There was a certain romanticism about people flying in their own machines. This hasn't happened so far. Most people thought that the future of flying was individual since the experiment was individual. No one ever predicted that 500 people could be in an aircraft over 18 hours of flying time.
3. Technology gurus also get predictions wrong. In 1936, Tomas Watson Sr of IBM said there was a market for 5 large computers globally! Ken Olsen the founder of Digital Equipment Corporation said in 1977 “There is no reason for any individual to have a computer in his home” he said this when PCs were launched. Back to IBM again. When Xerox approached IBM to distribute the photocopying machines in 1959, IBM employed a consulting firm and concluded that the market for photocopiers was 5000 units at best. If you thought these were the older tech czars, then look at the newer ones.
4. In 1981, Bill Gates said, “No one will need more than 637KB memory, so a computer with 640 KB should be fine” Gates also said, “We will never make a 32-bit operating system”. In 1992 Andy Grove, head of Intel said that “a personal communicator in every pocket was a dream driven by greed”. In 1996 the ethernet inventor Robert Metcalfe said that “The internet will collapse by 1996 and die”
5. Steve Jobs, one of the greatest tech czars was not immune. In 2003 he said “Music subscription models are bankrupt. I think you could make the second coming of Jesus himself available on subscription and it wouldn't be successful” Steve Jobs was big on Segway which flopped badly. However, Jeff Bezos was right in pointing out that regulators might not allow Segway to run on pavements.

6. When books were first introduced, royalty opposed them saying “If books are commonly available then the average citizen is knowledgeable and then how does royalty stay intelligent and above the common citizen?” Socrates said that people will get immersed in books and stop talking to each other.
7. In 1946, Darryl Zanuck of 20th Century Fox said that television will not be able to hold onto an audience for more than 30 minutes and hence will flop. The long format movie was going to stay.”
8. Inventors are also not immune from poor predictions. Steve Chen who founded YouTube said in 2005 “I don’t know there just aren’t many videos I want to watch on YouTube and hence I don’t think YouTube is viable.”
9. Here is one from the editor of Time Magazine “Remote shopping while entirely feasible will certainly flop. It has no chance of success” This was in 1966.
10. This is the very best one for me. “The Americans have the need for telephone, but we do not. We have plenty of messenger boys” Sir William Preece Chief Engineer, British Post Office.

My observation is that no one can truly imagine the future of technology. NASA predicted that we would go and live on Mars by 2000. People who are inventors of new technology go over the moon predicting what it can do. However, the incumbents who serve the need at that point – horses for travel, letters in a post office etc., will always pooh-pooh the new technology and run it down. So, when you read all these predictions, there is a more than 50% chance that they are wrong.

In terms of skills the three skills you will need to stay relevant in a future world:

Creativity
Complex problem Solving and
Critical Thinking skills

Prediction skills aren’t one of them!!

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