Wave of the Future, Same Old Story —
The New York Times Magazine

A review of *The New York Times Magazine*, 11 June 2000 edition, entitled
"Tech 2010: A Catalog of the Near Future."

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The millennium isn't even over, but it seems some people can't get enough of hyping the future. Witness the *New York Times Magazine* and its 11 June 2000 edition entitled "Tech 2010: A Catalog of the Near Future." Inside there are thirty-two articles and several columns about gee-whiz-bang-technology as it will be ten years hence. The articles cover everything from cars that can't crash to computerized kitchens that do your cooking, and from tiny robots repairing your body from the inside, to computer chips embedded in your brain that will remember your whole life. Each story is based on supposedly serious research projects that are currently underway, and such a broad range of topics creates problems for your normal scholarly reviewer, used to dealing with facts and footnotes of science and technology in the *past*, and not so likely to be able to pass judgments on predictions dealing with everything from genetics to quantum mechanics. But what strikes me as *uninteresting* about "Tech 2010" is whether or not the predictions are likely to be true. More interesting is to see it as a piece of popular culture on the topic of material culture, and from this point of view, what's remarkable is the rather stale banality of most of these stories of the future, and the apparently complete inability to escape the cultural narratives of the past.

Not that the magazine intended it this way. On the contrary, the introduction to "Tech 2010" claims that a completely new story about a completely new world is to be told. The old world, according to the introduction, was a world of technological determinism in which "new gadgets were just issued forth from remote R and D labs and we took whatever we got," where "Luddites" whipped of up fears that computers would run our lives, wreck the possibility for human intimacy and make the future a dismal place. Such doom and gloom, according to "Tech 2010," has now been replaced, "not by blue-sky idealism but by a temperate, PRACTICAL FAITH in the idea that machines are nothing to be afraid of, that we can use them when, where and how we want to use them and that the technology might actually improve our lives." No longer is the individual swept along by the currents of technology momentum. The "consumer is now SUDDENLY POWERFUL, deciding the shape and feel of the future."

What we have here is the proposition that the bad old world of technological determinism has been replaced by a fall-of-the-Wall, triumph-of-capitalism economy in which the consumer is not only king, but more importantly *free* to choose what to buy in the marketplace. Now I will pass by the opportunity to discuss the peculiarly American notion of democratic technology, enshrined in the works of Daniel Boorstin, in which a technology is "democratic" when everyone can buy one, and freedom means freedom to shop. Here it means that "Tech 2010" is deliberately organized as a catalogue of new technologies you can buy in ten years. I will also only sigh at the notice that just landed on my desk about a lecture to be given next week on the "scientific-technical revolution of the twentieth century," which is of course to be piled on the "scientific revolution" in the technology of the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution in technology before that, and the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century before that. The consumer revolution on which "Tech 2010" is predicated is thus yet another in a long series of Great Divides.

Alas, as these repeated tales of revolution might already suggest, although "Tech 2010" is supposed to be the catalogue of a Brave New World, it is really the same old story.

Who's Buying?

Given the catalogue format, a good place to begin an analysis of "Tech 2010" is with the question — who will be doing the buying?

The answer is made perfectly apparent by the encapsulated headlines announcing the stories, which deal with such things as commuter trains that are never late, elevators you don't have to wait for, computerized traders

to manage your stocks while you sleep, kitchens that cook your dinner while you work, teddy bears that read bed-time stories to your kids after your hard day, surveillance cameras that don't just record, but analyse the behavior of the sociopaths beyond your door, and of course lawns that never have to be cut on the weekend. In short, all this technology is for the upper middle class and the the rather wealthy.

Don't get me wrong. I (hopefully?) belong to the middle class. I'd like to be rich. I even love gadgets and I have a Palm Pilot — sorry, *personal digital assistant* — to prove it. On the other hand, I don't have kids, I haven't had a lawn in twenty years, a car in eighteen, and I don't have a stock portfolio to manage. Now I make these confessions not to reveal the pathetic state of my personal material culture, but rather to point out that the stories here, concerned with the problems of a single class, or at the very least those living and commuting to work in New York, *don't* have much to do with me, and *nothing* to do with the life of most of the people on the planet. There is no discussion, for example, of technological problems shared by everyone, like poverty, technological unemployment, energy conservation, global warming, the effects of environmental degradation.

Personally, I find it rather embarrassing that a collection of thirty-two stories, which are supposed to concern our future, turn out to be technical solutions of the wealthy New Yorkers. And on this score, perhaps the most tasteless story concerns automated flight systems — the rather absurd proposition being that airplanes without human pilots wouldn't need windows, so that you wouldn't have to have funny noses on your plane like you do on the Concorde, so that you could design aerodynamically efficient noses, and thus much better supersonic transports, and then build a fleet of 1000 supersonic planes to fly around the world. The author appears to be unaware that the debate which doomed supersonic airplanes in the U.S. had very little to do with noses, and a lot to do with rather more significant matters of energy consumption, pollution, depletion of the ozone layer, and especially the annoyance, physical and environmental effects of sonic booms. The author tries to avoid all this with a once-sentence suggestion that the new airplanes would only fly supersonic over oceans, although it is of course rather difficult to go from New York to Chicago this way. But the question is — can you afford to fly on the Concorde? If not, then you might agree with me and find the image of a fleet of supersonic transports taking the privileged on their travels through the sky while the people below deal with 1000 continuous sonic booms a good indication of the amount of social conscience displayed in "Tech 2010."

To say this another way, once upon a time, the consideration of the future, in *Utopia* of Thomas More or the distopias of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, offered an opportunity to contemplate the human condition. Here, the consideration of the future, on the part of one of the most powerful publications in the world, turns into a discussion of the technology needed to reduce the angst, reduce the cholesterol, and probe the colons of the rich, while keeping them smelling nice, with a good tan — I kid you not, there are articles on all these things. The spectacle is downright embarrassing.

Who's Selling?

Now that we know who is buying from *The New York Times Magazine* future catalogue, who's selling?

Here it's quite noticeable that almost every story has the same form. The author goes to some authority and asks them what will be. The authorities are either heads of companies, doctors, university professors, or the inhabitants of MIT's Media Lab. These authorities tell what amounts to a story of compounded ifs. One doctor, for example, says that *if* his lab finds the key, then (perhaps in thirty years) they will be able to re-grow limbs. Another expert says that *if* memory chips can memorize chemical reactions in the brain, then they can record the chemical life of individuals, and *if* they can find a way to replay this data, then they can replay your life, and (perhaps in thirty years) you can live forever. *If*, another says, he can transfer the results of his experiment with mice to humans, then (perhaps in fifty years) you will be able to choose your own skin colour.

Now, given that most of these if/then statements are admissions that what is proposed actually *can't* be done yet, and sometimes even entail tacit admission of failure, as in the case of the unbreakable quantum encryption code that can't be transmitted more than thirty feet, what I find most surprising is the supine posture of the reporters before the statements. Not that we should expect reporters to be experts in quantum mechanics, but the fact is they don't indulge even in the normal journalistic version

of objectivity, which usually involves at least asking some other expert for their opinion as to whether the thing will really work, whether it will really be useful if it works, whether it will be a good or bad thing, etc. That is to say, no alternative account is given in which a different story of the possible future is counterpoised against what the various experts have to say. Each reporter more or less accepts the word of their authorities that what will be, will be.

The point is not to rail against the failings of reporters, but rather to illustrate that through this form of "authoritarianism," we get the very same story that we are supposed to have left behind in the "the bad old days." That is to say, we get the very story the introduction to "Tech 2010" denies, namely that the technology will come out of the research lab whether we want it or not, emerging from the lab of it's own technological accord. There is certainly no talk about social action to prevent it. The only choice is whether to buy it or not. In short, what raises its head is the very ghost of technological determinism that was supposed to be banished to market hell. Indeed, even the introduction says that this special edition is about "devices that will be filtering into the mainstream" — not may.

Many of the authors in this collection seem to be dimly aware of the spectre of determinism lurking below the surface of their stories. The result is that two other ghosts also peak through. One is the lack of faith in the idea that technology is good for us and "actually improves our lives." In the article about surveillance cameras, one expert is quoted to say: "what bothers me about a lot of technological solutions is that they are basically antisocial." Another comments on the kitchen that cooks for you: "You shell peas, you unwind. You roll biscuits, you focus on the flour and water. Cooking takes time. That's part of the point. It takes time, inside your head, where it counts." Another notes that no mere chemical sniffer in your kitchen will ever tell you whether a martini is shaken or stirred. Another, after suggesting that we will all be eating a super-vitaminized, super-nourishing version of Ultra-slim, enjoins us, "while you are drinking that frothy whip that reminds you of a milkshake the same way a light bulb reminds you of summer, remember the Ben & Jerry's you may have left behind."

The other old ghost is the fear of machines, coupled to the fear that they may control, even destroy us. The most graphic example of this comes in a column about the "size of things to come," whose author tells us about "big" technology through the story of a co-worker whose hand was caught and mangled in one of those old IBM card sorters. The suggestion is then made that new technology is "small" technology, taking the form of devices that fit in our hand. "Holding them in our hand produces the pleasant belief that we control them," the author writes, "But we don't." They control us, devouring our time, undermining civil behaviour and ruining our lives. In a similar vein, William Safire comments on a change in telephone terminology from "operator" to "attendant," remarking that "the machine, or system that is operated is secondary to the human in charge, but the phone system that is merely attended is the master." The story on cars discusses development that will result in speeds, "beyond the capacity of humans to control," concluding that if we want safety at these speeds, "it will come at the cost of ceding control of the machine to computers." The story about technologies that are intended to help Olympic athletes reach the perfect mental zone for competition, suggests that athletes will cross the divide between the physical and the metaphysical, becoming "Perfect Machines." The article about nanobots repairing our aging bodies notes that this will alter our relation to aging and to mortality and therefore change "what it means to be human."

A little technological paranoia there after all? As opposed to "practical faith"? In any case, lest one get the wrong impression from all this, that maybe there is a serious treatment of serious issues in "Tech 2010," it should be noted that these doubts are always raised in the very last paragraph of the articles themselves, with no further discussion.

Money Back Guarantee

By way of conclusion I would like to point to a fourth old story we find in "Tech 2010." It also has to do with the experts and their stories, which many will recognize as the familiar rhetoric of the inventor, who are rather frequently found posing as devoted individuals, if not "maverick geniuses," only trying to do good for humanity, or a part thereof.

Here the starting point is again the fact that what our various experts propose actually doesn't work at the moment, although they promise it will work in ten (or twenty, or thirty) years. But one question is never asked. What do

our experts need to make their visions come true? The answer is what inventors always need. Money. It's curious that this is never noticed in a collection of stories devoted to new consumer capitalism. By ignoring it, the articles in "Tech 2010" allow their "experts" to go on posing as visionary benefactors, working for the good of mankind, when what they are really doing is sticking their hand out asking for cash. Thus we come to the truly un-edifying spectacle presented by "Tech 2010" — *The New York Times Magazine* acting as a shill for people who just want your money.

One searches for ironies in a situation like this. I found it on page 109. Here we find a report on an "amazing discovery in Europe," which is concerned with the "proven fact that aching feet *can* also be the cause of pain in the legs or back and *may* even be responsible for headaches." The discovery in question is intended to give you the "metatarsal support" that will "redistribute your body weight naturally" and eliminate uneven skeletal pressures, thereby relieving you not only of headaches, but also burning feet, corns, calluses, bunions, sore heels, and generally just foot problems of every kind. Indeed the headline reads: "After 30 years I can walk for the first time WITH NO PAIN!" And the subhead says "END SORE ACHING FEET."

This particular piece is an advertisement for Luxis leather shoe insoles. My point is that the story from the ad and the structure of the stories in "Tech 2010" are almost exactly the same. An amazing discovery, a common human problem. All that is required to solve it is cash. At least the Luxis people offer you a no-risk, money-back guarantee. The only guarantee offered by "Tech 2010" is that by the time the future arrives the story will be exactly the same as it is now. As for the products, I ain't buyin'.