

The AGI Foresight Study - The UK Geospatial Industry in 2015

An Expert Paper



The Media

Stephen Booth, PV Publications

As the saying goes, “It is difficult to make predictions, especially about the future”. In The Guardian for 16 January 1999 a major feature about the future made some predictions for 2009. It’s worth comparing them with what has actually happened and what was not foreseen.

Clearly the banking collapse of last year was not foreseen, indeed in one optimistic paragraph the author writes: “Accelerated returns from the advance of computer technology have resulted in continued economic expansion.” We seem to have hit reverse gear on that one.

Nearer the mark was: “Personal computers with high-resolution displays come in a range of sizes, from those small enough to embed in clothing. . .” although I have yet to see the latter.

In warfare, “humans are generally far removed from the scene of battle, which is dominated by unmanned, intelligent, airborne devices.” This is certainly beginning to happen but there’s still plenty of grim stuff on the ground (as I write, the PM is reading out a list of the fallen in Afghanistan since the House of Commons last met).

“The generation of paper documents is dwindling as books and papers of largely 20th century vintage are being rapidly scanned. Documents circa 2009 include moving images and sounds.” True, Google is busy scanning as much of the world’s books as it can lay its hands on (copyright notwithstanding) but there’s no shortage of bookshops around and there’s still plenty of printed material on the racks of WH Smith. I have seen the odd person on the train with an e-reader but at £300 you can buy a lot of books for that.

“Most routine business transactions take place between a human and a virtual personality. Often the virtual personality includes an animated presence that looks like a human face.” This is true in a few cases, and very irritating they are too. More work is needed on that one.

What the author got right was the gradual disappearance of computer cables due to WiFi and the emergence of privacy as a major issue: “...electronic communication technology is leaving a highly detailed trail of every person’s move.”

The Guardian’s futurologist missed the rise of social websites, ubiquitous CCTV, iPhones and Google (back in 1999 the search engine of choice was Altavista).

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A warning from history

There is another story from much earlier that needs considering. When I started work in the early 1960s it was almost a decade before I had to grapple with anything that could remotely be called new technology – the electronic calculator. But that humble device changed forever the lives of millions of workers. No longer were whole departments within companies devoted to doing calculations. Engineers, surveyors, accountants could all easily do their own calcs. But it was a disruptive technology because hitherto the process of calculations had been highly organised. Figures were compiled and written down in standard formats. Calculations were done on machines like the Comptometer or the Sumlock that required trained operators. Calculating was carefully controlled and included careful checking (for at least two hundred years surveyors employed people called “computers”).

For engineers and scientists before the 1970s, there was the slide rule, the “guessing stick” as it was affectionately called. But if one piece of technology should teach us to be prepared for the unexpected it is the fate of slide rule. In his excellent book *To Engineer is Human* Henry Petroski relates that in 1967 Keuffel & Esser, then the largest manufacturer of slide rules in the US and selling upwards of a quarter of a million a year, commissioned a study of the future that predicted domed cities, 3D television and much more. The study missed the demise of the slide rule within just five years and with it a big chunk of their business.

We should therefore expect the unexpected. Cast your mind back five years, to 2004. No Google Earth; no Google Maps; social networking was still largely physical apart from Internet chat rooms; Web 2.0 a twinkle in Sir Tim’s eye; and a mash-up was. . . well, anyone for bubble & squeak?

Humanity has ridden a rollercoaster of change for more than half a millennia. And like Moore’s law it seems the rate of change is accelerating. It is estimated that prior to the 1450s and the arrival of the printing press there were perhaps only 30,000 or so books in the whole of Europe; fifty years later there were more than 9 million. Today what took fifty years can happen in one or two. Youngsters now seem much more able to cope with it than their parents. They eagerly install software, update satnavs, hold video conferences over the Internet and tweet to each other. Many rely exclusively on the Internet for all knowledge and entertainment.

Yet amid this rapid change some technologies that have been around ten years or more are still not widely adopted yet, like unmanned aircraft or embedded computer screens. Sometimes this is due to human inertia, others to sheer cost.

Print media

Currently print media is facing a double whammy. A vicious recession has seen tumbling advertising spend on both display and classified. At the same time the unstoppable rise of the Internet has meant

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that for many personal as well as company needs it has become much cheaper to go online. Many print publishers have had to adapt rapidly to this environment. Most have a web presence of some sort but few if any have worked out how to successfully monetise the Internet. This is by far and away the greatest challenge facing the media.

While geo start-ups can absorb the skills and time of one or two individuals with an idea who may or may not discover the Holy Grail of personal navigation, location or place, etc. Those whose business has been printed newspapers or magazines need much greater resources to add to those deployed on print. There have been plenty of casualties, especially in the US but here in the UK too. Local newspapers are failing almost daily and publications that relied exclusively on advertising have already folded like the venerable Exchange & Mart, now exclusively online.

Daily newspaper sales have been on a downward slide for some years. The recent news that Rupert Murdoch is going to charge for content online is a move where everyone in the media awaits the outcome. If Murdoch succeeds in getting enough subscriptions to sustain his online business then others will surely follow.

As a very small publisher of magazines/journals addressing a very niche sector, our strategy is one that believes many people will continue to turn to the portable and dispensable printed copy for analysis from trusted sources and longer articles (although if they're too long we're experimenting with driving them to the website to read the balance). What serious readers like is the mix: the facility to go to the website to search back issues.

For the latest news, they can go to the website daily if they want. It remains a serious challenge however. Selling a page of display advertising to one client a year or two ago was a heck of a lot easier than selling 20 subscriptions at £50 each.

In the US, Paul Gillin, a social media consultant, along with many other pundits, claims that print media has failed to adapt to the influx of online publishing tools and social networking sites. "Information has become democratized today," he says and predicts print newspapers will disappear by 2015. Personally I don't buy it, at least not by that date and as for the "democratisation of information" it is too easy to turn to the Internet to feed your prejudices and gain a warped view of the world as new sources spring up and fade. Unless humanity is headed down a very strange and warped world of its own creation one has to believe that there will always be demand and value for news and commentary from well established sources.

Print media certainly is in decline and probably terminally, but it will still have life for most alive today. Those educated in the 1980s and 1990s will have experienced plenty of print media and although many have migrated to the Internet there will still be plenty who want to hold something more tangible than a mouse to get their news. But gradually the Playstation generation will come of age and my guess is that

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there will be very few printed business, professional or academic magazines or newspapers around by 2020.

I still believe that consumer magazines will survive at least until there are A4 spread size high resolution thin screens that are foldable, impermeable, pretty near indestructible and cost little more than a sheet of paper. There is still the challenge of how do you give the reader that pleasant experience of flipping through a magazine or a book and getting a quick overview of what's inside. Maybe the playstationers will just forego that little pleasure. It will probably happen for the paper thin screens, the technology is nearly there but because of cost it will be for the military alone at first (think rain, dust and maps).

For publishers, the trick for survival must surely be to offer a range of media and stay agile and responsive as new media become established. Just remember The Guardian circa 1999's prediction for 2019: "Computers are now largely invisible and are embedded everywhere – in walls, tables, chairs, desks, clothing, jewellery and bodies." Upgrade me Scotty, I need more RAM!

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