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What's Coming Next?

With the formal end of the Covid **public health emergency** finally set for **May 11**, many are breathing a deep sigh of relief. At this long-awaited moment, while the war in Ukraine is stalled, politics are slightly calmer, and the world seems exhausted, comes a brief but much-needed midwinter break.

Whatever reasons for this pause, it offers an opportunity to reflect on all that changed these last few years and what may be coming next. It is an oddly ominous time, for the pace of technological change is speeding up along with **disasters** and growing **environmental threats** to our world plus a real chance of **nuclear war**. Time might be running out.

Meanwhile, robots are still news – the scarily impressive Atlas humanoid model has just been given **gripping hands**. The Ukraine conflict pushes **drone** technology to new heights of lethality. **3D printing** extrudes entire houses, and spaceships are being built to **return to the Moon**. Progress marches on.

Now **AI** and **green tech** may be crowned as the Next Big Things. Yet not long ago, Web3 was it, or NFTs, or cryptocurrency, even if now they make for stale late-night TV **jokes**.

For the basic truth of history is that it is very hard to predict; surprises are inevitable – such as a sudden plague, or a war in Europe.

Post pestilence

The world may desperately want to return to the way it was without Covid, but the Aftermath will not quite be the Before Times reborn. Many workers might **never again** clock in at the office for a 40-hour week, and conducting meetings and interviews or doctor's visits online has become the new normal.

The pandemic naturally sparked huge advances in all forms of medical technology and public health management. Which measures worked and what didn't will be **debated** for years for the next plague that emerges.

From the start, the internet proved to be an utterly essential part of the universal fight against Covid, largely due to the necessity of keeping people isolated at home but still connected. It was used to share a lot of nonsense but also the hard facts of informed scientific consensus, while medical and especially genetic technology got boosts from big data.

Computer models were developed to forecast Covid's surges. To closely track the disease, ways were found to mine online data to trace its progression, from **monitoring sewage** to using **cellphone data** to track mass compliance to lockdowns. The virus' evolution has been closely followed through all its mutations worldwide since January 10, 2020 when the original genome was **posted online**, giving authorities and vaccine makers a much better chance to catch up and beat it.

Recent years have seen the adoption of personal medical tracking devices and great gobs of genomic data which have yet to be incorporated into medical practice despite the hype. Hospital and **domestic robots**, especially for old folks, are still being developed at a deliberate pace. Women's and minorities' health issues will also likely receive long-overdue attention, too. But it could get really sci-fi as some futurists predict that extending life-spans to Biblical lengths may soon be possible, which intrigues some comfortably well-off people like **Jeff Bezos** and his buddies.

Big Tech beleaguered

Yet Bezos and all the other tech billionaires may find it a bit harder to compete in their private races for immortality and space.

Before Covid, it looked like Big Tech might soon rule the planet. Their rapid growth during the pandemic to fill needed services in communications and logistics made that even more likely. But some old trends are now acting together to undermine that possibility.

Like wolves chasing down big game, the unrelenting pursuit of regulators around the planet along with the annoying harassment of **multiple lawsuits** might just bring these great beasts down. Surrounded by critics and foes on all sides, the leaks, **whistleblowers**, and internal documents have exposed some remarkably short-sighted timidity, thoughtlessness, and greed in their internal workings.

While current leaders do not greatly inspire, the old guard has passed on or turned to other pursuits. After successfully **predicting** the pandemic, Bill Gates is repairing his reputation as a **thinker**. Even Bezos left Amazon to play with his other toys and be **phil-anthropic** while Elon Musk, the reigning robber baron/whiz kid, is much more obsessed with trashing Twitter than anything else. And who knows what Mark Zuckerberg is really up to these days off in his **imaginary universe**?

The immediate problem with Big Tech is that the companies all overbuilt during the pandemic, and the whiplash effect of the world economy trying to jerk back to life tangled them up too. They made the typical mistake of thinking the good times would last.

All of them are **laying off** workers in huge numbers – an estimated **250,000** in the tech sector, with over **50,000** recently from Big Tech alone – and with a brutal disdain for the employees. Many Googlers were **fired** with form-letter emails; others found their door keys no longer worked. This lack of concern or even common decency says much of the true regard management has for the managed.

The economy seems sturdy enough at the moment that displaced workers might land even better jobs. But this coldness may be calculated; with a billion paid out just between Microsoft and Meta, getting workers to quit decreases the severance payouts needed.

Not that it matters to the pundits who forecast tech trends. As always, they came up with **happy lists** of things to watch. Many are just projections of current trends, such as the continued growth of cloud internet services, faster connection speeds, and smarter net-connected devices. Others seem included as “just in case” like quantum computing, and a

few seem to be outright wishful thinking, such as the idea of a “digital immune system” to vaccinate networks from malware.

One prediction which stands out is that of the growth of “**superapps**”, applications with “miniapps” built in. Like Swiss army knives, these are bundled suites of tools, primarily financial, mainly for smartphones. While billions of people are said to be using them already, they seem to be yet another attempt to promote lucrative private **walled gardens**.

Yet nobody seems to be looking beyond at what war or unrest may bring, not to mention **UFOs** and **balloons** flying around – just like no one ever predicted **generative AI**.

While many experts foresee great things to come from **ChatGPT** and its cousins, others are **not so enthused**. They recall the many **failed AI** claims that could not be realized. Remember the recent dream of **self-driving cars**, to be delivered any day now?

But there are even more mysterious things AI can do than write or paint. It can somehow tell things about people that no human can – like their **racial identity** from x-rays – and no one can figure out how the algorithm does it.

A final personal note

We’ve been at such tipping points before. Forty years ago, while preparing to graduate from art school, an instructor took me and my classmates into an empty room. He pointed at a box with a keyboard next to a TV monitor.

“That’s a **personal computer**,” he said. “It’ll change everything. Watch out for that.”

Playing with Jamii’s Mac SE later that year, I finally got what he meant. In a few years, I was using one daily. Within a decade, I saw a steady erosion of skilled, well-paying jobs in printing and commercial art begin. While highly-talented people are needed at the top end, now clerical staff on PCs can make most things. **Generative AI** may play out similarly.

Watch out for AI. It will change everything.

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