

Deep Tech

THE FUTURE BEGINS TODAY

BY RIK MYSLEWSKI



IBM PREDICTS THE FUTURE

IBM recently released its second annual “Next Five in Five” predictions, a list of five ways that technology will transform our lives in the next five years. Let’s give their prognostications a bit of a reality check.

Greening. *IBM:* In 2013, you’ll reduce your carbon footprint with “smart energy” technologies that’ll comingle electrical power and data, allowing you to monitor and modify each of your appliances’ energy use with your iPhone or browser. You’ll also be able to choose the source of your power: wind, solar, nukes, or dirty ol’ King Coal. *Reality:* The cost of the required infrastructure upgrades for both providers and consumers would be enormous, and the benefits wouldn’t match the expense. *Probability:* 30 percent.

Driving. *IBM:* Our cars will communicate with each other and with traffic systems to eliminate congestion, prevent accidents, and reduce both pollution and road rage. Also, stoplights will observe traffic flow and change their cycle lengths in real time. *Reality:* The “smart highway” fantasy has been around since the 1950s, and GM’s 1939 Futurama predicted that by 1960 cars would sense each other’s presence and space themselves accordingly. I’m not buying this one. *Probability:* 10 percent.

Eating. *IBM:* Your food’s packaging will tell your iPhone about that comestible’s composition and nutritional value, the amount of energy used to produce it, where and when it was grown or produced, the pollution it has been exposed to, and more. *Reality:* Call me a cynic, but deep-pocket food producers and distributors will lobby long and hard to ensure that such information will never be made available to John Q. Public—just look, for example, at the frothing frouferah over simply labeling food as genetically modified. *Probability:* 5 percent.

Phoning. *IBM:* Your iPhone will provide shopping, banking, ticket-purchasing, and other services, all tailored to your location. Snap a picture of someone wearing an outfit you like, upload it, and your iPhone will display a brick-and-mortar or online place to buy it. *Reality:* I’m with IBM on this one.

When there’s money to be made, someone will provide the technology to make it. *Probability:* 90 percent.

Healing. *IBM:* Ever-better technologies will enable doctors to peer into your innards, listen in on your vital gurgles and thumps, and click on your 3D avatar’s private parts to learn their medical history. *Reality:* Although there are certainly new medical technologies on the horizon that promise breakthrough after breakthrough, our creaking multipayer health system can only support so many gee-whiz goodies before it collapses. Put me down as “undecided.” *Probability:* 50-50.

Clip this out, file it away, and check it in 2013. But don’t bother calling me on it—I’ll have retired by then.

Rik is still waiting for his promised flying car.