UNCOMMON COMMON SENSE

By Bill Frayer

The Difficulty of Prediction

In my thirty plus years at Central Maine community College, one of my favorite courses to teach was “Technology and Society.” We would read several novels and many articles dealing with the effects, both intended and unintended, of technology on society at large. Some of the articles we read would, predictably, predict the future of technology and speculate on how it would affect our lives.

Of course, predicting the future is a messy business. Many major developments are unanticipated. The head of IBM, at one point, predicted that the world would not need more than

a handful of computers, having no idea that computers would evolve from the giant mainframe calculating machine to the infinitely useful PC. Who would have predicted the immense effect of the Internet on all aspects of life?

I have always been interested in the predictions which have been completely, or partially, inaccurate. The July 4, 1955 issue of *Newsweek* made the following predictions for 1975: Nuclear power would be widely used for cheap electricity, food sterilization, disease treatment, and would be widely used as fuel. Cars would be programmed to “drive themselves” on superhighways. Radio telephones would be able to be carried in one’s pocket. The world would see the end or “near end” of cancer, heart disease, and the common cold. In farming, there would be fewer, larger farms, and “unmanned” spaceships would orbit the earth. As you can see, though not completely accurate, these predictions do contain some truth.

Some predictions are now humorous. In 1945, *National Geographic* published an article overestimating the widespread use of “atomic power,” suggesting it would largely replace the need for coal, oil, and hydroelectric power. (Do you remember the TV ads suggesting atomic power would be “too cheap to meter?”) The article correctly predicted the use of TV to transmit news and sporting events as they happened. It also predicted transcontinental commercial air travel, but saw this solution for navigation: “Blanketing the entire United States will be a uniform system of 100,000 aerial route numbers…painted on roofs and on the surfaces of highways, marked on mountainside with crushed rock, laid out on lawns and road intersections with small schrubs…” Wow, can you imagine?

Robert Millikan, of Cal Tech, predicted in 1939, that “life in America fifty or a hundred years hence will not differ…much from the life of today…” He predicted that our use of coal and oil as energy sources would continue for “a thousand years,” and “so far as tapping the energy ‘locked up in the atoms’ is concerned, we can count that out.” And of course, there is the US Patent Office’s Charles Duell’s infamous 1899 quote, “Everything that can be invented, has been invented.”

Not all faulty predictions involved technology. Charles Darwin, in the forward to his *Origin of Species*, wrote “I see no good reasons why the views given in this volume should shock the religious sensibilities of anyone.” In 1955, *Variety* magazine predicted rock ‘n roll “will be gone by June.” And in 1905, President Grover Cleveland predicted, “Sensible and responsible women do not want to vote.”

I find this all endlessly interesting. I may include more in a future column. If you have documented examples of more interesting predictions, please let me know.