

FLEETING THOUGHTS


 FLEET
SPECIAL

Fear of the future

Telecommunications have taught us that disruptive technology is not a friend to established business – so what does the future hold for automotive?

ONE OF THE most spectacular failures in the history of futurology happened recently. No one predicted a majority Conservative government – not even David Cameron – yet that is what we got. No one has explained why the polls were so wrong and perhaps we'll never know.

If the UK General Election proved anything, it's that we can't predict the future anymore. The rate of technological change is dizzying and the resulting disruption in our behaviour – how we eat, move, vote and drive – makes predicting what is going to happen next increasingly difficult. Yet there are entire industries predicated on what might happen in five or 10 years' time.

Two emails recently caught my eye: one was asking me to lock in my energy prices until 2018 and the other offering me a new flat-rate two-year mortgage. We are being offered ways to future-proof ourselves at every turn. Why? Because we don't know what's going to happen – and we may even fear it. There may not have been much obvious enthusiasm for another five years of David Cameron's government, but the consensus seems to be that voters decided they preferred the devil they think they know. In the automotive industry, I get the impression that, as Donald Rumsfeld memorably put it, there are known unknowns but there are also unknown unknowns – things we don't know that we don't know.

I'm an early adopter – I like to try things out when they come along, partly out of curiosity and partly because it's my job. I recently tried out Liftshare and Rentacar. The former is

a network that allows people doing similar journeys to buddy up; the latter allows me to rent out my private car. I've received zero requests on either but I think that will change as networks become more integrated and data more easily shared. These networks are in their infancy and I expect them to grow in the same way that Uber did, the poster boy for this tech.

Google is also working on the technology and industry rumour suggests Apple is building a car. Disruptive innovation is rarely a friend to established businesses – unless they can ride the wave of new technologies. Trying to read the runes in automotive requires a journalist to play with the new gadgetry finding its way into cars; downloading apps, pairing devices and flicking through more menus than a vegetarian in Germany.

The UK car industry's annual jamboree at Millbrook testing ground recently allowed manufacturers to show off their brightest new cars to the press. The advances in car tech never fail to astound. Now you can watch live television, answer emails, send tweets – all using voice control.

These changes happened in a little over five years; where might the next five years take us? Self-driving cars, EVs, increasingly sophisticated interfaces, data crunching, more leisure and improved communication seem to be the consensus. If smartphones are a template for the pace of market-driven technological change, what might be about to happen in automotive is startling.

It's important to note that this might not all be a land of milk and honey, and the ramifications may be difficult for the fleet industry

to get to grips with. While new opportunities will open up, some industries may be headed for the exit ramp. How the road and power networks will cope with an explosion of smartcars hasn't really been worked out – and that's one area the private sector can't drive without public investment.

And, while 3G and 4G have revolutionised the way we access our information, 30 million autonomous cars exchanging terabytes of data and streaming the latest *Game Of Thrones* episode are going to take quite a toll on our clogged e-networks.

There are rather more fundamental issues here too. If no one crashes a car, what does that mean for the insurance industry? What will happen to the oil industry if no one buys petrol any more – and how will our national grid cope when everyone plugs in their car at night? If no one is injured in a car or on the roads, what about medical insurance? If no cars are damaged, what of mechanics? If getting a ride is as easy as pressing a button on your watch, what of car-rental companies? And if all cars drive themselves, who trains learner drivers? Mans taxis? Drives buses? Who regulates these new markets – and can the state ever react quickly enough? More to the point, why would anyone choose to buy a lump of metal that spends most of its time sitting on their front doorstep and loses two-thirds of its value in three years?

The answers to these known, and unknown, unknowns might be a few short years away, yet they are still unclear. That's the problem with futurology: as Ed Miliband found out, it's usually wrong.

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