



The 10 Biggest Stories of 2023 That Say the Future is Here

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With so much news announcing unprecedented technological, economic, and cultural change, it's difficult to tell the true signals of the future from the noise. This article unpacks the top ten news stories of 2023 that indicate major shifts unfolding in our world, with critical implications for the future.

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OpenAI launches GPT-4, and the generative AI gold rush accelerates. Recession fears wax and wane but never subside. Culture wars continue, dragging in the world's largest and most recognizable companies. And while it's not a World War, the world is at war in more places than we've seen in a century.

In 2023, there was no shortage of major news announcing unprecedented technological, economic, and cultural change. It felt like every week was rewriting the future.

Buried within all the noise, there are signs that the future is already here. But those signals of the future can get lost in all the noise. And the cost of missing them is high. Take Meta's sudden pivot from the Metaverse to AI as a cautionary tale. You can't ignore the future. But you shouldn't bet it all on the wrong thing.

Deciding which initiatives matter for your business isn't about predicting the future. It's about paying attention to where the world might be going and ensuring that you're prepared for all possible futures.

This year, conversations about the future have been dominated by AI. We saw how it's already revolutionizing major parts of life and work, from threatening white-collar jobs to powering a brain implant that enabled a paralyzed man to walk using his thoughts. But AI is only part of how the future may unfold. If you're paying close attention, you've seen that this year was full of other critical developments.

Here are the top ten headlines from 2023 that you might look back on in a few years and wish you had noticed. They have profound implications for the future. And unlike simple projections, these stories indicate major shifts in our world that aren't far-off hypotheticals. They're unfolding right now.

- 1. The National Ignition Facility (NIF) has repeated a nuclear fusion reaction resulting in a net positive energy yield.** Although the NIF isn't on a direct path to commercial fusion power production, this progress is one of the biggest achievements in decades to make fusion available for mass production. Fusion, the source of the Sun's energy, could offer a nearly infinite source of clean energy.
- 2. The US faces a rising threat of widespread civil unrest.** Last year, a poll by the Economist and YouGov reported that 42% of Americans think that a civil war is likely within the next ten years. This year, a former U.S. president found himself facing multiple criminal charges for undermining the U.S. election system and fomenting an insurrection. And he's currently the frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination. The rise of violent rhetoric in the public square suggests there's only more bad news to come.
- 3. The climate crisis continues to force citizens of the Global South to march northward.** Due to unpredictable weather patterns and resulting political conflicts, large populations are fleeing the Sahel region of North Africa and driving Europe's highest migrant influx since 2017. As global warming accelerates, more areas are becoming uninhabitable, leading to economic instability, cultural fragmentation, and political strife.
- 4. Quantum computers took a big step towards commercialization.** Scientists achieved breakthroughs in harnessing the weird effects of particles at a quantum level to enable record-breaking computational speed and power. The technology could render the encryption behind passwords obsolete, making emails, personal health data, or financial transactions insecure. Digital privacy would become a thing of the past.
- 5. Universal basic income is being rolled out...in red states.** It's not all bad news. UBI pilots are already supporting people in parts of Alabama, Florida, and other traditionally conservative states. The programs have reduced poverty and increased financial stability, demonstrating the appeal of UBI across the political divide. As automation displaces more people's jobs, this once-fringe concept is going mainstream.
- 6. The first gene-editing technology has been approved for treating life-threatening diseases.** New therapeutics using CRISPR have successfully alleviated symptoms in patients with sickle cell disease. Ethical considerations and cost issues remain, but gene editing could revolutionize medicine by eliminating inherited diseases, enabling personalized therapeutics, and even unlocking superhuman abilities.
- 7. Global population growth is expected to grind to a halt by 2050.** Governments around the world are spending billions on initiatives to

reverse dangerously declining birthrates, to no avail. More extreme measures may soon be on the table, from increased legal immigration to bans on abortion in more autocratic regimes. As populations age and critical industries face a shortage of young workers, a global economic crisis might be on the horizon.

8. **The CDC issued a warning that an antimicrobial-resistant fungus is an “urgent threat.”** Cases of the rare fungus, Candida Auris, rose rapidly this year. The microbe spreads easily in healthcare settings and doesn’t respond to conventional treatments. Meanwhile, the world is facing an antibiotics pipeline crisis, leaving us out of options to treat common infections. Growing antimicrobial resistance threatens the gains of modern medicine, making routine medical procedures dangerous and potentially returning us to a time when everyday infections could be lethal.
9. **Weight-management drugs are hurting consumer demand across multiple categories.** Retailers and banks are warning that the use of drugs like Ozempic will bring down demand for junk food, medical devices, and maybe even furniture, beer, and tobacco. These new drugs have the potential to eradicate obesity but also change consumer behaviors in unpredictable ways.
10. **And yes, AI is still coming for your white-collar job.** GPT-4 scored higher than 90% of humans on the bar exam and the GRE. The LLM from OpenAI has scored impressively high on many standardized tests and has been used by millions of users in everyday tasks. Its pace of improvement over just the past year has been startling. While predictions had warned of LLMs displacing blue-collar jobs, it’s white-collar jobs that are most threatened in the short term.

To be sure, it’s easy to dismiss signals from the future. Many of these stories may not apply to you right now. Some are just too scary to contemplate. Rather than developing a response, it’s easier to poke holes in their premise. But what’s the safer bet to make—underestimating the rate and scale of climate change and doing nothing, or having the worst-case scenario be that you overinvested in green technology? The cost of inaction is much greater than that of overreaction.

And there’s still so much to be grateful for. Life expectancy is back on the rise in the U.S. International alliances seem to be holding. And Taylor Swift is more awesome than ever.

To navigate uncertainty, future-focused leaders are not only able to separate the signals from the noise, but they also take action to prepare for all possible futures. Sure, the forces taking shape now may take a while to impact your business, and how and when may not be exactly clear.

There’s an old Chinese saying that the best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago. And the second-best time is today.

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