Daniel Franklin is the executive editor and business-affairs editor of The Economist, editor of The Economist's annual publication on the year ahead, The World in... .and editor of Megachange.

Four decades ago no one could foresee how lives would be changed by the internet, AIDS was as yet unknown, the Soviet Union was intact and Apple and BlackBerry were still just fruit.

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The next four decades will be just as full of the unexpected—probably even more so, since we live in an era of particularly rapid change. With so much uncertainty about the future, what's the point of predictions? Or, put another way, isn't it crazy to produce a book called "**Megachange: The World in 2050**
"?

Actually, it is not as crazy as it seems, for a number of reasons. First, when you decide to focus on big trends, on the things that are likely to matter most for years to come, you have to cut away the clutter. You may be wrong about what the world will be like so many years from now, but you certainly get a sharp perspective on the world as it is today, and how it is changing—whether it be the great economic shift to Asia, the soaring quantities of digital data being produced or the health implications of a rich world that is growing older and fatter. Looking far into the future gives a clearer view of the present.

Second, some subjects lend themselves to analysis over the long term. One obvious example is climate change. Another is demography. Population trends are not quite set in stone, but you can have a fair idea of what sorts of changes are in store. They are likely to be big. It took the world 250,000 years to reach a population of 1 billion; the latest billion, which moved the global population from 6 billion to 7 billion, was added in just a dozen years. By 2050 the total will have risen above 9 billion.

You may be surprised to know that half of the extra population will be in Africa. Or that by 2050 nearly 400m Nigerians will probably be on their way to outnumbering Americans, and the French may outnumber the Germans. Or that by then China's population will on average be older not only than America's but even than Europe's.

Such surprises are a third reason to take the long view: it can reveal a wealth if intriguing data and ideas. Some of them may be counter-intuitive (such as the notion that by 2050 China's economy will be growing at a decidedly ordinary rate of around 2.5% a year, or that it could be a time of extensive ecological restoration). Others may seem far-fetched (the likelihood of the discovery of alien life, say, or the rebirth of an extinct species). A few of the ideas are striking for their mind-concentrating boldness: for example, the argument that in scientific terms the future belongs to biology, not chemistry or physics; or that, when it comes to religion, the secular will eventually inherit the Earth.

So the future, as painted here, is likely to be both stimulating and provocative. And varied, too: the book brings together the views of 20 different contributors from The Economist and its extended family, on a range of topics that are grouped together in four broad areas: people and relationships; heaven and earth; economy and business; and knowledge and progress.

With such a variety of voices and themes, you would not expect to find a single view of the future. But the overall impression, unlike much future-gazing, is not doom-laden. Of course, the world faces huge challenges in the coming decades. The difficulties include how to feed over 9 billion people, how to respond to new security threats and how to contain climate change. Yet there are ways to adjust, and this book is far from being a gloomy read. Megachange is something to be embraced, not feared.

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[The Age Gap: Demographics Threatens Economies](#)

['Fiscal Nightmare' Not Based in Reality](#)

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