Agreeing to write a joint column was simple. We would present two views of a common idea in a single space. Young and old. Female and male. Technology and media.

However, in starting a new column, we both had much to learn. We had to become comfortable with a new schedule, a new type of collaboration, a new set of habits, and a new editor. For our first effort, we were asked to predict the technological trends for 2012. In the process, we discovered that a single future can be read in different ways.

David: We agreed that I would predict the future by interviewing a distinguished expert, a senior scientist. He and I had a wonderful conversation charging through the topics of software and hardware, science and business, networks and institutions. We agreed on several predictions: more global connections, greater speed, more demands upon those who use technology.

However, as we talked, I sensed that my expert wasn’t that interested in our attempts to divine the future. He had seen the story of technology unfold in his own life and expected no surprises in the next chapter.

When I asked him what prospects he saw for the next 12 months, my colleague shrugged his shoulders and laughed. “What can happen in a year?” he asked, as if the answer might simultaneously be “much” and “nothing at all.”

Erin: I knew that David would expect me to exploit social media to predict the most significant technological development of 2012. I decided to take a hybrid approach of texting, tweeting, and posting questions online in addition to traditional, in-person conversations.

As with any public outreach, I found that the problem wasn’t a lack of quality ideas but the slim chance of finding focused attention. Asking questions doesn’t necessarily elicit answers. Even though they spend most of their day online, my friends can’t engage with every request. To get a response, I had to ask personally.

As I anticipated, I didn’t find one, clear conclusion. One group, the digital natives, predicted further developments in smaller, cheaper consumer goods: tablets, smartphones, and data storage in the cloud. They expected technology to move us closer to complete mobility and constant connection.

A second group, largely seasoned engineers and scientists, predicted other incremental developments that are unlikely to appear within 12 months: cheap LED lightbulbs and more efficient hybrid engines.

My prediction for the significant technology development of 2012? I agree with the friend who said apologetically, “I don’t know enough; I’m behind on my reading.”

We both failed in our efforts to predict the coming year but we failed in unique ways. David’s failure came by asking experts for signs of progress within computer science. Erin’s came from the assumption that computer science will support future innovations. Between the two, perhaps, we’ll find the common future.

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Perhaps the distinctions between generational views of technology are only superficial.

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