

Futures as a heterotopia

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Futures studies can be understood in a variety of ways. For many, it is a new field, taught via the rules of the Academy, formally at many universities as well as in short courses for cities and corporations. For others, 'field of knowledge' is too strong a term; rather, it is a discourse, a way of seeing the world, focused particularly on time. Still others see it less as an area of inquiry and more as an arena of action. Futures studies, for them, is one of the many social movements seeking to reduce the power of the prince and merchant, and move it to the citizen. These actors seek to change the world, generally, via the sustainability discourse. For them the current business-as-usual future is the problem, new alternatives are urgently required. Within this social movement perspective, most are integrated in their approach, focused on inner and outer change, self and collective. There is also a new group of professional futures studies practitioners, focused on scenario planning, visioning and strategy.

While these discourse are all true, for me futures studies has been more of a family. Two members of this family have been the World Futures Studies Federation and the journal *Futures*. The first over time has for me lost its relevance. In my view, it has not been able to deal with the issues of equity in a globalized world, nor has it led the many new futures organizations in our digitalized world. The transition from East–West and North–South organization to true global organization did not occur. But the failure of the WFSF should not be seen as negative; rather, its failure has allowed hundreds of new organizations to prosper. Indeed, I would not even say failure, but natural sunset.

In contrast, the journal *Futures* has made the transition. It is the site for the main debates on the future and on the futures. Whether focused on the new European social bill (because of Ageing) or on new futures of South Asia or attempts to hegemonize futures (as with Integral futures), *Futures* is the place where these debates are held. And, it is not a small ship, plying the backwaters and carrying only the debates between futurists. Rather, it has included aspects of long term planning, ethical debates in normal and postnormal sciences, and futures generating thinking, to mention a few. And it has prospered as new journals such as the delightful *Foresight* (focused on practitioners and organizations) and the *Journal of Futures Studies* (focused specifically on futures studies) have grown. There has been space for all. Editors over the past 30 years have kept *Futures* on its toes—from David Green to Colin Blackman, Clare Degenhardt (and back to Colin Blackman) to Zia Sardar; all have kept futures marching onward.

Of course, improvements are possible. A wiki futures site linked to the journal would be great. Having a digital space for comments for each article would also be useful. Links to new futures books would be great as well. But, alas, its beauty is that it is an SSCI journal, and of course, that is its tragedy: Elsevier does make it expensive and difficult for many to purchase. Its referencing style is incomprehensible, the cause of much woe throughout the futures community. And the time from submission to publication needs to dramatically decrease for *Futures* to keep pace with a 24/7 world.

Still, for me it remains the shiny heterotopia. It has not lost its relevance, rather it has transformed with the times. Whether it can make the next jump to a digital (with avatars, video, and in the future, even holograms) wiki journal remains to be seen. But in a world of multiple 'topias', I believe *Futures* will be fine, in that even as the knowledge evolutionary landscape changes, *Futures* has a niche.

1. Personal history

I first read *Futures* as a teenager, an undergraduate at the University of Hawaii in the 1970s. I saw it in my professor's office. It would be many years before I finally published a piece in it, and when I did I was thrilled. Heaven was here. But it was in *Futurics* that I published my first piece in 1981, on the futures of death and dying [1]. Three years later, in 1984, I published my first piece – on the Hawaii Judiciary's futures program – in *Futures* [2]. This was to be followed by additional articles on justice futures, including a much-cited piece co-authored with Phil McNally on the Rights of Robots [3].

The next phase in my published research was in regional studies—articles on the Pacific Shift, South Asia and the Philippines [4–17]. Included in this phase were articles on the Indian philosopher P.R. Sarkar and his unique Tantra-based perspective on futures thinking. I still remember the graciousness of Degenhardt in sending a copy of an issue of *Futures* directly to Sarkar.

My next phase was a series of articles on futures studies itself—on the types of futures studies [18–21], on ways of knowing (with Paul Wildman) [22], and macrohistory [23,24], and on layered epistemologies, particularly causal layered analysis [25–29].

This was followed by special issues, written while at the Communication Centre at Queensland University of Technology when it housed the World Futures Studies Federation Secretariat. Working with colleagues Tony Stevenson [30,31], Paul

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Wildman, Jennifer Gidley, Greg Hearn and many others, a special issue on Communication Futures (with Stevenson) resulted [32], as did a special issue on the futures of the university [33,34], which then became a book edited with Jenny Gidley [35]. More recently has been work on action learning led by Jose Ramos [36,37]. Currently, shorter trajectory pieces (Spirituality as the fourth bottom line [38], the Futures of Asia [39], Alternative Futures of Muslims [40], for example) are my focus in *Futures*. Most of my longer written work now goes to the *Journal of Futures Studies*.

Futures has not been my own journey, as per the family metaphor I mentioned above, but the journey of the field.

2. Favourite articles

Staying with the personal bent of this piece, about ten or so key papers and special issues stand out. First was the late Magda Mchale's special issue on Gender and the Future [41]. Jim Dator's startling piece, "It's only a paper moon" [42], in 1990 asked us to still honor the moon even if becomes virtual. While not an exploration of secondlife.com per se, he certainly had the direction right.

Jan Nolin's "Communicating with the future: Implications for nuclear waste disposal", remains a highlight for me [43]. He asked a number of serious questions: Can we transmit a message about nuclear waste – warnings or instructions – to be received thousands of years from now? And: Can we ensure that crucial information will be available and intelligible at a critical moment? His meta question was: Can knowledge survive through various cultural and historical contexts or is all knowledge context based such that any communications with the future will be incomprehensible?

Zia Sardar's article, "Colonizing the future: The "other" dimension of Futures Studies", challenged the Orientalist model of futures studies [44]. He focused on the techno-bias and the Western gaze of much of futures studies, challenging many including Richard Slaughter to embrace other ways of knowing. Slaughter responded that while in general agreement, he still found Sardar's work was irritating [45]. *Futures* is still wrestling with this issue of the politics of civilizational context as evidenced by a recent special issue on Integral Futures (edited by Slaughter) which continues further down the empiricist linear developmentalist trajectory (though now it claims to include an inner dimension) [46]. As we know, some issues are novel, other issues do not go away. For me, Sardar's challenge led to a "let a hundred flowers bloom" approach which in turn resulted in a *Futures* special edition titled, "What Futurist Think" [47]. This was a compilation of fifty-two short articles on how futurists around the world imagined and theorized the future. This later became a volume in Slaughter's excellent and ground breaking *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* series [48]. Of course, who are the futurists was well set out earlier by Eleonora Masini in her piece, "Women as builders of the future" [49].

While Dator had imagined the postmodern world, Sardar and Ravetz in a special issue on Cyberspace [50] challenged it, seeing it as a projection of the Western and now global teenager. This, in the 1990s, became a major source of discussion at the Queensland University of Technology's Communication Centre.

Futures has also been a great site for reviewing scholarship. Steenbergen's review of global modeling stands out [51], as does Bill Halal's review of global models [52], and Sam Cole's 1987 review of global models [53].

Futures, as expected, also breaks new ground. I am reminded of Sanghan Yea's stunning piece in which it was argued that it is not overpopulation but depopulation that will change the game [54]. Yea made the controversial argument that depopulation is likely to begin around 2050. Economic systems must be transformed and children and motherhood treasured.

There are of course many others – by Dave Hicks, Ian Miles, Riane Eisler, Mahdi Elmandjra, Ashis Nandy, James Robertson, Elise Boulding and Johan Galtung to mention a few – who have authored important pieces in *Futures*.

Certainly, the foregoing is not a quantitative or even a balanced qualitative review ... as before, it mentions people that I have known, worked with or been influenced by. They have inspired me in my futures studies, and I hope my contributions in the journal *Futures* have been of some use to them.

3. Futures' futures

As an SSCI journal, *Futures* occupies an important place in the emerging field of futures studies. As we know, universities reward research centres and academics who publish refereed pieces, especially in SSCI journals. We can expect this to continue. However, the structure transforming, peer-to-peer, wiki world challenges traditional academic journals like *Futures*. This challenge will not go away, and as futures studies continues to grow and influence policymakers throughout the world, we can well imagine far more use of wiki spaces. Shapingtomorrow.com is a leader in this area and we can expect the democratization of knowledge to continue. As well, as the world globalizes, new journals, futures websites, movements, wikis will continue to grow, especially in the Chindia realm. We can anticipate new journals (as presaged by the *Journal of Futures Studies*) emerging in this region, not challenging *Futures* but fitting into other landscapes, much as the journal *Foresight* has brilliantly done, in focusing on the futurist qua practitioner. Three futures then are easy to foresee: (1) *Futures* growing in the SSCI academic space; (2) *Futures* transformed by the peer-to-peer digital avatar enriched technological media revolution; and (3) *Futures* challenged by new journals because of geo-political changes. But will there be transformations which we cannot yet foresee. Will *Futures* be able to adapt to unlikely futures?

I do not know the answer to this question. The journal has done well in the past decades, but technological (and the new, flatter, digitally rich worlds they create) as well as dramatic geo-political challenges are not minor events and starting to think through the implications for *Futures* in particular and journals in general would be wise.

I certainly hope for a bright future for the journal *Futures*, following the trajectory of futures studies. I am certainly grateful for being part of the growing family, field, discourse, social movement and body of professional practitioners.

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