



Reflections  
Consciousness, culture and the communication  
of foresight

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An apparent dissociation, that between futures research, with its natural depth, and larger, mainstream popular debates about human and planetary futures, is at the heart of meeting the challenges of the new century. While the corporate-colonized media showcases consumerist techno-futures, valuable futures-oriented research is ignored and marginalised. When an emerging media oligopoly has media access to most of the planet's peoples, and promotes news bordering on propaganda, what matters of rigorous and deep futures work? [1]. All the valuable insights in the world, all the deepest understanding of the challenges we face in the 21st century, are worthless if they cannot be communicated more broadly and influence change. It appears to me that Futures research must move beyond its academic enterprise into the domain of the media, through coordinated and intelligent communications strategies, through a hybridised foresight practice that is both epistemically reflexive and aesthetically infusive.

This reflection begins with this simple observation: much of the potential for progressive futures and futures-related research to influence social change is lost due to its inability to communicate effectively through contemporary and emerging media and communication channels. This problem particularly struck me while researching for and writing a monograph on futures studies in Australia [2]. Through this research I realised that the vast number of futures researchers and consultants engaged in deep and progressive futures work in Australia, from small consulting practices to large research institutes such as the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and Institute for Sustainable Futures, were largely overshadowed (in the mainstream media) by shallower work representing narrower interests [3]. This seems to be the case not just with futures research in Australia, but with futures-related research globally, where issues related to our futures are often distorted through government interference and corporate

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influence alike. The portrayal of emerging issues such as terrorism, bio-technology, ecological transformations, and democracy movements are often mis-represented in, or omitted from dominant media channels [4]. Likewise, escapist ‘vandeville’ is on the increase, entertainment made so that people no longer want to, and therefore don’t have to, confront their place in the 21st century [5]. We have devised a multiplicity of ways to avoid the otherwise liberating and transformational potential of confronting our existential conditions. Thus the global *problematique* is increasingly also the ‘suburban living room *problematique*’, the false comfort of the passive media consumer. I have found a painful yet inescapable irony in my own role as a Futures researcher, which has lingered unresolved in my mind.

Upon further reflection this irony might be described as a fundamental disjuncture between institutions with great communicative power in the public sphere, and that small minority doing rigorous research about human futures. The commercial media inhibits awareness of fundamental contradictions in the way we live. Instead of conversations about peak oil and climate change, we get commercials about the benefits of buying bigger and bigger SUVs. Such institutional power is unrivalled at making the outrageous seem natural, and the normal (or critical) seem outrageous. This is accurately described by Sklair as the ‘culture-ideology of consumerism’, perpetuated by Trans-national Advertising Agencies (TNAA) which use ‘projective advertising’ as ‘the technique of producing new needs/wants as components of a new lifestyle’ [6]. We might also draw insights from Pierre Bourdieu into how capitalism appropriates the language and symbols of legitimacy (cultural capital) to strengthen its power [7], in particular in the face of widespread disgust with Enron style corporate excesses, and a global development agenda that produces diminishing returns at best, and economic, social and ecological ruin at worst.

There is no guarantee that good futures-related research translates into healthy social change, especially when it fails to be adequately communicated. Futures research does not act instrumentally, futures studies and research must work in the domain of communication, intentionally raising awareness and consciousness, communicating an idea whose time has come, well before any given futures research influences change (policy, program or law). The futures terrain is so messy, full of probabilities and improbabilities, that futures work does not easily lead to straightforward solutions and techno-fixes. Making the case for change is hard as future-related knowledge is not as empirically apparent to the general public or even to practitioners of conventional science. While a tsunami one mile away makes us run for the hills, Jim Dator’s tsunamis of change, ten to fifty years away, most often draws scant public attention, and we become the proverbial boiled frogs in the slowly heating pot. So futures challenges and issues require concrete clarification and definition in ways that provoke public conversation and responses. People’s awareness, assumptions and field of vision live in the domain of communication and, deeper still, consciousness.

In communicating with people on futures issues, we bump up against individual consciousness and the interior value systems people carry. Rationality is bounded within this field of consciousness. We cannot assume, therefore, that people will respond in a ‘rational’ way, when ‘rationality’ for one is ‘irrationality’ for another. George Lakoff’s research into cognitive frames and metaphorical expression shows how common sense reason is often no more than a product of repetition, our frames of reference political as well as socio-cultural constructs [8]. Because knowledge about the future is not value-neutral, when brought forth into the public it provokes a range of responses from various

social interests, with their attendant perspectives and complex configurations of value systems. So the communication of foresight needs to begin with a more general appreciation of the ways by which people perceive their world—not with the particular perspective brought forth through the work of a futures researcher.<sup>1</sup>

On a broader level, the consciousness of the individual is situated within a person's inter-subjectivity—culture. 'The future' cannot be understood without understanding worldview and ideology—we project our perspectives onto the canvas of time, both pasts and futures, be this the perspective of those in Tang Dynasty in China, the London of Charles Dickens, the Afghanistan of the Taliban in 2000, or George Bush's USA in 2001. The perspectives people hold, their worldview, their ideology, mediates the communication of foresight—the way people 'hear' news and people's interpretations of events are critical to the communication process. Communicator and communicatee are equally implicated in the zeitgeist. Analysis of how we participate at the level of consciousness in our world is one of the advantages of methods such as Causal Layered Analysis [9].

Different knowledge traditions constitute communication differently as well. From science and technology circles communication is often seen in instrumental terms, such as diffusion research [10]. Scientific experts, extension officers or government functionaries communicate to the public to produce needed social change. Humanistic traditions might be seen to use communication as a creative dialectic. Participatory action research emerged as a response to colonialism, the historical prevalence of domination by a small elite and need to formulate a learning of liberation through conscientization [11]. As slaughter has argued, Habermas' work is appropriate here in terms of reframing futures research as 'communicative action' and a dialogue-generating activity, rather than an instrumental one. Perhaps futures work can help kindle the fire of a discourse ethics for the 21st century? [12]. Critical futures studies can be seen as a disruptive and transformational enterprise which, married to media intensive methods, can be a way of casting healthy doubt into prevailing assumption over human futures, and helping to renew a global conversation over planetary futures [13].

'Future-jamming' might be considered the activist and communications parallel to academic critical futures studies. Future-jamming is a take on Naomi Klein's concept of culture jamming—whereby media activists use the symbolic logic of global brands and mottos and invert them—a type of symbolic intervention that disrupts the logic of the brand and its message [14]. *Adbusters* is the quintessential example of culture jamming, using the same techniques of big ad agencies that promote consumerism, to attack consumerism and its symbolic webs. Future-jamming would extend this concept, by employing savvy communications methods to debunk future-oriented propaganda. Sociodrama might be thought of as a live corollary to this, a practice in which public awareness-raising is achieved through public interventions, insinuating provocative theatre into reified social spaces [15].

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<sup>1</sup>Foresight communicators have access to an increasingly broad range of models for understanding consciousness, all of which hold potential to inform the communication process. Equally important is to endeavour to understand our own consciousness as foresight communicators, and to acknowledge the assumptions that we hold. At Swinburne University of Technology, Spiral Dynamics and the work of Ken Wilber, are used to look at how values systems mediate the way that we know the world. Fields such as Diffusion Research, Health Promotion, Development Communications, and other disciplines have a much longer tradition of research and practice in this area which cannot be ignored, and where valuable insights can be drawn from.

If we look at the types of communication most prevalent and powerful in society, we cannot ignore the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of communication. The public consumption of film, music and home video (games included) seems to massively outweigh the more 'rational' forms of communication: magazines, journals, and non-fiction books. From this perspective, to render foresight work and futures research in rational formats (low on accessibility) is to consign them to a very narrow audience. Thus there may be places for many levels in foresight-as-art: in the citadels of 'high culture' where capitalism consolidates its power through the accumulation of cultural capital; in pop culture's malls for distributing film and music; and at the grass-roots, where street theatre and old factories form the stage for socio-drama. Future-jamming would incorporate these multiple communications approaches with an aestheticised sensitivity to the symbolic logic that forms popular consciousness, in order to disrupt hegemonic futures, and reflect alternative futures back upon the world as options otherwise unseen [16].

Regardless of whether future-jamming has any future at all, futures research needs to incorporate savvy communications strategies into research designs. This means moving beyond researcher mode into new roles: the artist, the producer, the narrator, the film maker, the socio dramatist. I have no special formula for such a strategy, however it is important to consider to whom futures-oriented research will be communicated. How do culture, aesthetics, consciousness, social and institutional interests mediate how people interpret futures research? Extending this idea, perhaps valuable futures research, already sitting on library shelves collecting dust, need to be picked up by communicators, and brought to life through media-intensive reanimation. We need to ask: what are the available modes of communication that can bring existing futures research to life?

Is humanity in a 'Plato's cave' of the 21st century, fearful of the shadows projected at us through the corporate/state media—a litany of global challenges distorted into popular images of catastrophe, human evil, and conspiracy theories? ICT on the one hand, has enabled (but not created) the emergence of meta-identity sub-politics, such as the World Social Forum. On the other it has been created by a small group of shareholders/controllers with politically and economically vested interests. The animal spirits of global ICT enterprise need to be harnessed, co-opted as a platform for global solidarity. Can we imagine a day when CNN, teleSUR and Al-Jazeera co-develop an interactive hour-long program on peace futures?

This leads us out of the domain of just futures research and into the political economy or 'realpolitik' of the media and communications industry. In the West at least, corporate media consolidation has eroded the diversity of content and the capacity for independent and critical programming [17–19]. The corporate/state control of content is one of the key obstacles in introducing alternative futures, innovation and knowledge that deal with the real issues our species and the planet's species are facing. Ultimately we must face the political economy of the global media and communications industry if we are to deal with the gross distortion and colonisation of meaning in human futures, and create new paths toward more sustainable and just futures [20]. If, as Sardar writes, the future is 'occupied territory', reclaiming our futures will require breaking this stranglehold of power, coupling critical futures thinking from broad perspectives with media activism [21]. Beck uses the term 'sub-politics' to indicate collaborative action on the part of trans-national civil society (inclusive of grassroots participants and experts) to deal with the 'world risk society' of manufactured uncertainties [22]. Likewise, a media sub-politics must also emerge to bring

to life a new political economy in media and communications, if we are to have as sane, humane and sustainable 21st century.<sup>2</sup>

There is no time in human history when futures studies has been needed more. How many challenges do we face, how many consequences, and how high the stakes for us all? In this short reflection, I have argued that we need to draw a solid bridge between futures research on the one hand and media and communications on the other. For futures studies to realise its full potential for positive impact on the world, its practitioners need to put communications and the media at the centre of foresight. For foresight practice to become the raiser of public awareness, the informer of wise social change, the improver of policy and that which sets the context for bold innovations, there needs to be a larger role for the foresight communicator in 21st century foresight and futures studies practice.

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