A Simple Guide to Futurewatching

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Futurewatching and Environmental Scanning

"Environmental scanning" is the term for the futurewatching function, used in futures studies and strategic planning conducted by many organisations, academic, private or governmental. However, anyone can futurewatch if they are prepared to make the necessary effort, can access a suitable range of information and can apply themselves to master the skills over a period of time. It is stimulating, at times scary, and provides helpful information about ourselves, our society and our prospects as humans on this planet. For individuals, as well as interested groups and businesses, it is an essential way to anticipate changes, either with protective measures, or to take early advantage of new opportunities.

I liken futurewatching to the ways by which the early Polynesian navigators found their way across the vast oceanic waters to find and settle on new islands.

Mindset

The fundamental tool for futurewatching is your own frame of thinking: your mindset. The scope of investigation is truly oceanic, and the clues to be found are diverse and even obscure. We all bring to our ways of looking around us the influences of our parentage and upbringing, our education, the society or societies in which we live, and the streams of cultural influences which connect us, locally and globally.

Futurewatching requires us to reach out beyond those influences, to openly encounter other ways of knowing and valuing, and the influences these are having on our collective futures. We do not need to abandon our own frameworks, nor do we judge the others adversely, but we must be conscious of our own mindsets.

It is also important to maintain balance, because futurewatching can throw up complex mixes of often novel information which can be full of hype, weird, frightening, dense with data or technicalities, pedestrian, distorted, or wildly fanciful, and yet all of which needs to be drawn into the mix from which our more settled insights can be developed.

Our minds need to be always curious, open to new information, flexible and creative, adjusting to novelty, unwilling to settle for fixed and rigid thinking, capable of holding to ambiguity, ready to explore sources of information which may at first be considered unprofitable, always willing to look for the long term possibilities and what may lie over the horizon. Remember the essential question to be asked of any source of information, "Is there a future in this?"

Getting Started

The old-time Polynesian navigators learnt skills in their local waters and on specific short

journeys between groups of islands. Likewise, we need to begin close to the home shore, practising the skills and developing the judgement necessary for oceanic voyagers into our futures. Some prentice navigators travelled and learnt from the local masters. If you can find an experienced futurewatcher to share your findings, it would be a great help. Otherwise, a group of beginners can usefully work together, trading finds and discussing their implications.

The possibilities and information in futurewatching are truly oceanic, and therefore it's better to start with a familiar topic or range of issues. Be prepared in searching to push out from the shores of the present or the immediate future, to look more than five to ten years ahead. Examine a wider and longer term range of information and viewpoints. Apply the mindset characteristics above.

Overlaps of information from other areas of knowledge will impinge on the chosen focus, which is entirely to be expected, and can help to reinforce the significance of the original find. These overlaps in their turn can be explored and the frame widened again until eventually the futurewatcher becomes accustomed to navigating the ocean, as well as exploring chosen shores.

What Are We Looking For?

The old navigators understood all the relevant aspects of the southern stars, but additionally they observed and looked for other clues:- the movement of the ocean currents, behaviour of the birds and fauna, flotsam on the waters, the character of the clouds and much more. Futurewatchers have several broad categories of clues to look for:

+ Events (their interpretation, contexts and background).
+ Trends (which can give rise to events, fade from view, or lead to significant changes over time.
+ Emerging issues, which can arise from events or trends.
+ Weak Signals, hard-to-detect-developments which are "below the radar" of much public awareness, but potentially can become emerging issues, or even significant trends or events.
+ Ideas and Visions (collective or individual) which can spark and sustain movements for change.
+ Alternative possibilities, which may be publicised as scenarios, or expressed in forms which we can categorise broadly as "What if…?
+ Historical investigations and parallels which deepen our understanding of how other societies managed, or failed to manage, changes.

There are other clues but the key question above, "Is there a future in this?" is always a useful guide.

Trends are often popularised in the public arena on very trivial grounds, as if they were the latest fashions. They may be long-term, and their origins may lie back in the "weak signals," or in the visions. Their development may follow a curving upward path, the S curve, until they emerge in public view to public and media awareness. They may also fade before reaching this level.

Emerging issues can arise from responses to events, often disruptive in impact, or to trends, as alternative responses are developed by societies and governments.

It is important to be wary of the use of historical analogies. Understanding the

past is a debatable topic of study:- history is "story" almost as much as futures are "story," and some commentators are slipshod in their understanding of the past.

Where to Look

Everywhere! and Anywhere!

There are so many sources of information that the futurewatcher can be glutted.

There are print media in daily, weekly and monthly forms, newspapers, magazines, and also journals and reports, which come from public and private sector and non-governmental sources.

There are sources in radio, film, and TV, in news, interviews, documentaries and some entertainment forms.

There are websites, wikis, blogs; also books and book reviews. There are discussion groups, both online and face-to-face, public lectures, seminars, and academic journals, if they can be accessed.

The public and national library collections can be valuable resources when the user learns how to make the best of them.

Note that fiction sources, online, in print, and on video, can provide valuable insights into futures, especially the forms which either extrapolate a current trend, or explore an alternative future on the lines of "What If …?"

To develop awareness of the deeper undercurrents of emotional and intuitive perceptions in society, fiction, poetry, film and art are valuable seers for the sensitised futurewatcher.

Just Scanning

In the face of this welter of possibilities, how does the futurewatcher scan?

It's not easy for a beginner, because there are temptations to get lost in detailed examination and reading. "Scanning" is not the same as "reading": it is rather a skimming process, similar to that used by bodyguards at official functions who survey the crowds, on the lookout for the oddities which can signify danger or problems: only here those spikes say, "future". This process is a skill which needs to be mastered.

Having identified such items, the scanner can extract the item for more leisurely investigation. Again, it may not be necessary to get lost in details. A skim through, picking out information relevant to futures, amid the "noise" of present or historic detail, can be made. Useful tools for this can include a pencil, highlighter, notes, or extracting sections from online source to store for reference.

How the futurewatcher organises the selected material depends on the purposes for which the scanning is done. There are guides to filing and storing information, online or in more traditional systems, or the futurewatcher can devise his, or her, own system: but some kind of systematised organisation is needed.

Assessing the Selected Scans

This can be done in several ways and may take some practice to master fluently.

A. Time frames

Is the time frame in the item looking out in the short, (five years or less),

medium (next few decades) or long term? Some scans may even project out for several hundred years, but if they are based on sound analysis, they are valuable for helping to determine the priorities which can get lost in the "noise" of many short- and medium-term concerns.

B. Reputation of the source of the item

Is this from a reputable person or group, using sound research, or reliable experience? While the weird, and those with fixed agendas, may offer some useful insights on occasion, generally they should be taken cautiously or ignored. However, there are sources of information from the margins, especially from those both global and local, who are usually ignored and yet who are important to note. It is from these areas that emerging issues arise, in visions, experiments and movements for change. Unless the futurewatcher has a natural inclination to look in these areas, efforts to widen the mindset are needed.

C. Level of analysis

Three broad levels can be considered.

1. Superficial.

Many media reports on aspects of futures can be described as "pop futures," often repeating earlier material, or suggesting that current aspects of society are longer term trends. Such reporting can also show that a significant issue has reached the top of the S-curves, mentioned earlier. In which case, what is the response? Initial reports of significant scientific or technological developments may also be presented with much hype before more critical assessments develop. A major event with future implications provides endless opportunities for "immediate reaction" responses.

2. Analytical.

Books, documentaries, reports and reviews in a variety of academic, official, non government and private sector sources comment on the issues and events, usually as "problems" or "challenges", with suggested responses, and even analysis of the responses to responses. A major issue may take many sequences of analysis, action and evaluation before it subsides, or continues as a chronic problem. Historical analogies may be used.

3. Worldviews.

At this level, unseen assumptions need to be noted, both in the futurewatcher, (note the earlier warnings about mindset) and in the sources of items selected. Official reports, authoritative writings, or documentaries from respected producers, can all contain personal assumptions, unstated, but shaded with implication in the arguments and even the selection of facts. There are also reputable people or groups who have, for various reasons, strong, vested interests in the status quo and raise sceptical responses, or make outright denial of well-supported evidence. Questions therefore need to be in the futurewatcher's mind. What frame of reference is implied in this item? Whose interests are being served? Whose voice or what information is missing? (This is another reason for looking for what is being said by those on the

margins.)

D. Looking inside and underneath

Most information and analysis is concerned with the surface of human experience and the physical world. Futurewatchers need to seek clues for "What's going on in peoples' minds?" There are always the diverse range of human values and beliefs which have motivated human societies through the millennia. Human concerns may be everyday and mundane, or they may individually or collectively signify a mood for change which may gradually or dramatically develop.

Marketing experts and political pollsters have developed great skill in probing these areas. Experts in human behaviour are exploring individual responses which can be used in a variety of diagnostic ways. And neuroscience is probing deeply into how our brains operate and how we make decisions. Information from all of these areas can be noted by the futurewatcher. They are the deeper levels of the currents of the Ocean. But personal experiences in various forms, in media, in print and in social networking, are valuable as well.

A Note on Wildcards

This futures term refers to an event or development which is totally unexpected, arises almost instantly, but which has incredibly significant impacts. Another term in vogue (misleading, to Australasians) is Black Swan. Natural disasters on a catastrophic level, like the tsunamis and mega-sized earthquakes of recent times, can be categorised like this, but they are always possible in certain areas, and wise communities are, in some measure, prepared to cope with them.

Human induced mega-disasters are also likely, but human nature tends to discount the need to be prepared. The recent worldwide financial disaster was foreseen, even foreseen to be impending by some watchers whose warnings were ignored. Wild cards may be rather the disasters humans were too shortsighted or too complacent, to heed.

This means that the futurewatcher must always be disciplined to widen their own frame of thinking and keep a sensitive side view in mind on those emerging issues or "under the radar" signals which can forewarn of a wildcard. It would help if the futurewatcher can share such insights with colleague similarly disciplined.

Making the Connections and Developing the Stories

It is quite likely that as the futurewatcher goes looking, that connections between items, even if not explicitly made, are noted. In fact a good futurewatcher nurtures this skill. Even though the sources may be widely divergent in type as well as worldview, the links between them are revealing.

Although the futurewatching is undertaken for individual interest, the connections can build up to stories, or new narratives. If there is purpose in the looking, a special focus or question, then the items can collected and assessed, before being incorporated into a presentation or scenarios.

Enjoy the hunt and the finds.

For further reference, especially for those futurewatching for organisations, Maree Conway, Thinking Futures, www.thinkingfutures.net

and the Shaping Tomorrow networks, www.shapingtomorrow.com

are invaluable resources.

See also Inyatullah, Sohail, Causal Layered Analysis, www.metafuture.org/Articles/CausalLayeredAnalysis.

More traditional print sources of interest are:

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