Essay

Culture and the Selection of Techniques for Exploring the Future

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Culture pervades our world. It shapes what we see, think, and believe. It also determines, or at least shapes, our responses to events and our view of the future. In the broadest sense, there is Western culture, Confucian culture, Islamic culture, and others both contemporary and historical. In a narrower sense, there are the cultures associated with nations—Polish culture, French culture. Even narrower are the cultures associated with specific groups. Oscar Lewis identified a global culture of poverty. Most recently, people have been talking about a youth culture. For a couple of decades we have had discussions of the drug culture. Cutting across these categories are professional and occupational cultures, e.g., the culture of medicine, of science, of engineering, and of acting.

Culture does not elude our smaller institutions. It is widely recognized in a large literature that there are cultures specific to individual companies and other organizations. First cousin to each of these cultures is the concept of ideology. Ideology is the glue that holds many, if not all, of the cultural elements together and gives conceptual coherence and focus to beliefs and actions.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that culture in all of the above forms influences views of the future and the way tools and techniques are selected or developed for exploring the future. For example, the idea of progress so central to Western thinking had its origins in enlightenment and reached its fullest flower and broadest consensus in 19th century England and the United States.

Cultures and ideologies often anticipate the future as some progressive movement to a better state. The ultimate better state in mainstream Christianity is an afterlife in heaven. Those futures lead to, define and

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limit appropriate behavior. If one has a holy book which describes the future and how to get to it, there is less attention to the study of the future as a field for research and understanding and a domain to influence. In the modern period, the study of the future was cast into its current framework, by the Marquis de Condorcet. Living in the period immediately before and into the French Revolution, but having a genius's insight into social change, he saw that some of the tools for more reliably anticipating the future were:

- Studies by experts;
- Watching what the wealthy do today, since the less wealthy will do it tomorrow. Condorcet effectively discovered or invented the concept of "trickle down."

Condorcet saw new philosophical movements liberating humankind and specifically anticipated greater freedom for women.

There was a striking change in the Western world, particularly in England and the United States, in the nature of the theater. Unlike more traditional societies in which classical plays are acted over and over again, and the measure of the quality of the performance is the elegance with which that classical story is told, there was an entirely different model in the emergence of Western theater.

Storytelling as theater began to evolve in the West. It had different purposes, shifting from moral lessons to sheer entertainment. Novelty, newness, and innovation marked the theater in the 19th and 20th centuries. That is not to say that extremely popular plays were not repeated, and it is not to deny that there were recognized classics, from Shakespeare to Shaw, and on to O'Neill. But by and large, the stories developed for the theater, and later for films, were stories that were continually modified and changed even though as in the Western, as a genre of film, there have been a few overworked themes. Newness marked the new theater. The scenes in those scenarios eventually came to be seen as possibilities for describing fictional worlds, or capturing biographical information and presenting people in interesting new ways. The scenario concept was seen as a way to present the future.

Converging with those changes was greater literacy, the rise of low cost publishing, and the massification of reading. By the late 19th century, Jules Verne was exploring hypothetical worlds in French literature and H.G. Wells was similarly presenting fantasy worlds in the English language. It was only natural that the scenario became a more formal tool for the systematic exploration of future possibilities. In a scenario

one can use any set of assumptions to present an interesting informative picture of some future state.

By the time the 19th century came around, the role of mathematics in society, particularly through science, technology, and engineering, had become increasingly central to progress, or at least to change. Characteristic American and European and later Japanese development over the last 100 years has been the quantification of more and more intellectual endeavors, most notably matters connected with the physical sciences and engineering and later the social sciences. Therefore, for those who build or make things it was only natural to look at historic patterns, try to quantify them, and to determine whether extrapolation of past trends disclose a future condition. It was also only natural that numerical tools be expanded to less quantifiable subjects, leading to reliance on human judgment and the quantification of the significance attached to anticipation by those human judgments. Hence, the evolution of the Delphi technique by those coming out of an engineering background.

Quantification and scenarios come together in a striking way in American business, and to some extent in European business, in the development of mathematical modeling. The computer assists mathematically modeled future situations and analyzes their future outcomes by rapidly manipulating large numbers of variables in the model's defining equations. The most extreme examples of this are the studies done by the US Department of Defense in working out future conflicts by testing with computer assisted models the reliability and vulnerability of military strategy, tactics, and hardware.

Government

The reality of large government bureaucracy comes into play in the United States' choice of futures tools. A broad ideology of democracy, which urges participation and openness in virtually all activities, has made the Delphi popular in the US, for all sorts of topics by all kinds of institutions. For the bureaucracy, Delphi has the value of giving a kind of false quantification of information insofar as it is not quantifying information so much as the judgment of experts or even non-experts about that information. The tool, however, has great appeal because it allows one to bring in stakeholders who are not experts to look at the future on some topic, institution, or thing. Incidentally, the most common abuses of the Delphi are that users often take the responses to represent a true

picture of the future, whereas a much more effective way to use Delphi is as a means of suggesting where more detailed analytical work and forecasting needs to be done.

The commitment to experts in a culture can have extreme effects. In Japan, for example, a well ordered society with a high regard for the educated and people at the top of hierarchical structures, the Delphi has been employed on a scale larger than anywhere else. The Japanese government has conducted extensive Delphi every five years, often involving thousands of expert respondents in technical fields. The results are collated, organized, and given broad distribution. It is rather curious that little or nothing is known about how results are used or whether they make a difference. Unlike more open societies more committed to broad participation, there is no effort made to deliver the results to any public target groups or to work with users to tease out specific business or industrial sectoral implications of the Delphi.

The Germans, with their own high regard for experts, have adopted the Delphi system and is now in its second national round. As in Japan, and in contrast to the United States, this respect for expertise limits participation by affected parties, interested parties, or people who could not themselves claim expertise or have that imputed to them, such as businessmen, customers, and other affected parties.

Recently, in Japan and Germany there is a nascent move toward more active delivery of Delphi results to users and toward working with users to explore implications.

The USSR, when it was the USSR, was a closed society. It favored safe, quantitative extrapolations and mathematical models with no participants other than the forecasters themselves in looking at future outcomes and developments. Forecasts by individual people could be dangerous, even life threatening, hence, the emphasis on seemingly objective mathematics. We have no information about the futures situation since the USSR has broken up.

France, having one of the strongest commitments to experts of any of the democratic societies, and an ideology of French superiority, have moved to the invention of techniques, many of them are similar to those used in the rest of the West but renamed and somewhat reconceptualized to Frenchify them. The clearest examples of this chauvinistic behavior are reported in the books by Michel Godet.

Governments tend to repeat the exploration of the future in multiple sequential studies in order to make the results appear more reliable and more confidence building. This tends to smear out the relationship

between studies and decision-making because the first study in the series may contain the same conclusions and information as the last, but nothing will be done in government until it has confirmed and reconfirmed earlier forecasts.

The Corporation

Turning now to a lower level of culture, corporations differ widely among themselves, but put a high value on transparency. They prefer that the processes used to forecast be so clear and readily understandable that there are no black boxes and no arcane tools that they have difficulty understanding or explaining. Transparency is crucial to building credibility and legitimacy in the corporate situation. Corporations are, after all, enthusiastic about using futures material to influence their decision-making. The action orientation of the corporation makes futures work much more likely to have tangible effects.

The plea for transparency puts a high premium on expert knowledge, as well as broad non-expert knowledge, staff involvement, and clear communication. The corporations also find scanning techniques valuable in understanding the social, economic, political, demographic, environmental, scientific, and technological factors that could influence it.

Corporate and government insiders like quantitative tools and techniques, especially in highly technological areas.

Corporate culture also has intense concern about the social, political, governmental, economic, and environmental aspect of its business. Consequently, it has a great deal of interest in techniques that tend to illuminate those issues. They have an interest in forecasts about consumers, about government regulation, about demands and supply of raw materials, about future price structures, all of which tend to draw upon information not usually considered part of the futurist armamentarium, but closer to the interests of the marketer or the economist. In the United States there are distinct organizations of short-term business forecasters that have little or nothing to do with the futurist forecasters who work on a generally longer time horizon. Their short-term market-oriented forecasts put a high value on quantification and simple models and at the same time on explanation of the bases for and the interpretation of the quantitative data.

Associations

Association of various sorts representing the interest of business, professional groups, or others tend to want their forecasts to be based on strong consensus. They frequently use experts, usually within the profession or field of interest of the association, to do studies based on expert judgments. Or, if they feel the need to have a broad base of involvement to legitimate the work, they will often use a Delphi technique, where it is relatively easy to involve scores to hundreds of people and hence, give credibility to the results. But for most associations the credibility comes from the expert panel rendering its expert judgments, or the expert panel sitting in oversight on staff studies.

Ethical Concerns

In Western Europe, particularly on the Continent and in Germany and the Nordic countries, there is an intense concern for ethical matters in relation to almost all forecasting. Nuclear power and genetically modified foods are examples. The ethical issues tend to become foremost and often grasp the greatest amount of attention, particularly with regard to technological forecasting issues. In contrast, the UK, as best exemplified in their recent and elaborate Foresight study and the continuing follow - through to that, have emphasized the quality of life and practical consequences, as well as new technological opportunities.

Ethical issues in forecasts achieve a more mixed status in the United States. There is a substantial part of the population intensely concerned with environmental issues, raising them often in ethical categories, as well as in terms of the direct affects of environmental abuse. We are witnessing, at the time of this writing, an interesting transfer of ethical concerns from Europe to the United States attached to genetic manipulation of crops.

In the United States, ethical concerns do not generally have the universal force that they do in Western Europe, although they are increasingly prominent, and particularly in selected areas, such as environmental affects. In the United States, what function as ethical issues often come through as matters of social parity—questions of transgenerational fairness, or equity involving groups lower on the socioeconomic scale who may not enjoy a particular benefit or advantage in the unfolding future at the same pace and to the same extent as more prosperous people. It is interesting to see the transformation of what might be much more

intensely ethical concerns in Europe converted into a semi-market issue of equity in the United States.

Class and Culture

In the United States there is little with regard to forecasting that has cultural antecedents. That is, no harking back to a great intellectual fount, an ideological base, or a fundamental thinker. Rather, issues, because the continual dynamism of the society, the influx of new people, and long term continuing economic development give a look to the future a much more instrumental orientation with virtually no attention to cultural history or antecedents. There often is concern in the narrow sense of what might so-and-so do to Native Americans, what might such-and-such do to religious groups, what might such-and-such do to a particular set of beliefs. In the absence of a grand cultural background, healthy universally shared culture is a relatively minor concern. In sharp contrast, in the Indian subcontinent, culture is an important element in all three countries and the traditions are often used as a means of weighing the appropriateness or acceptability of various alternatives.

We see little or nothing about forecasting out of China, but in conversations, for example, with people connected to the Three Gorges Project, apparently no attention was given to anticipating secondary consequences, or adverse affects on the environment or people. Rather, one of the largest projects ever was looked at strictly instrumentally. This may reflect, of course, the Communist government overlay on a much deeper tradition in Chinese society of honoring the past and honoring the basic beliefs of ancients, such as Confucius.

For futurists involved only in localized issues, understanding cultural differences may be objectively and subjectively a matter of no concern. However, as the orbit of interest of an organization widens, it is important to pay attention to what is going on at the intellectual level with regard to the future in order to understand and better engage people. For example, it is widely reported, and often celebrated, that in Japanese companies a vision of the future and extensive use of metaphor are a crucial part of innovation. In sharp contrast, in an American firm there not only are detailed analyses but the development of so called PERT charts, which lay out on a daily, weekly, monthly schedule the steps for getting to the goal. Those who are hooked on highly quantified graphics approaches do not understand the visionary metaphorically based work and how to work with people who do. The cultural divergence that one

sees even in single countries has to do with difference in class or local customs which create their own allusions, language, and often involve a shift in meaning of words.

One must understand the environment in which one works, often at a surprisingly micro-level. When working outside one's language or cultural many of the allusions or names have tremendous intellectual weight. In an Arabic country, that an allusion to the Koran or a historic Islamic figure can carry meaning is likely lost on someone from outside that culture.

The biggest rift, of course, is between techniques which are quantitative and those which are qualitative. They often involve not just cultural differences but different skills. If you are uncomfortable with mathematics and numbers, it is difficult to be at ease in a quantitative futures picture. On the other hand, if you are facile with numbers, it is often difficult to appreciate that other people cannot understand, assimilate, and respond to what you present in an elegant, coherent, and precise way.

What to do? Take the time to find out and explore what the cultural differences are among the people you are dealing with. In the Canadian government, when exploring some projects for the Northwest Territory, a full commitment was made to engage the Inuit in the process. The chairman of the task force went to the Inuit communities and sat around the campfires with them, and, as much as he possibly could, engaged them in discourse on their turf, in their framework, using their customs. He recognized that to bring them to Toronto, to sit in an office could be so uncomfortably novel and potentially disruptive that little could be accomplished.

Even among the advanced nations cultural problems arise. An American acquaintance reports that the CEO of his British firm had acquired some American properties. In visiting the new facilities he talked about many things with staff and often ended his comments with, "It would be nice if...." Months later, when nothing happened, he was puzzled and annoyed. His cultural guide to America had to tell him that from the Americans he was getting full agreement, "Yes, that so-and-so would be nice," but it was not the American culture to take that kind of comment as either an expectation, or an instruction, much less an order.

In summary, not every futures tool or method fits every cultural context. Failure to recognize this can lead to misunderstanding and gratuitous intellectual conflict. On the other hand, the opportunities for cross-cultural learning in exploring the future are immense.

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