

Introduction

Tomorrow is so hot right now. And no, this isn't a weather forecast, but a statement about what's the next big thing. Tomorrow's news is always in-season and goes under the brand name 'The Future'.* Things to come have become their own franchise, starring in everything from glossy magazine features, to amateur podcasts, binge-watchable TV shows, and fast-fashion accessories. The Future is so front and centre it even shows up as an affirmation on the side of sleek urban business hotel rubbish bins (a true story). It fills construction site graffiti, inspires a clutch of hip-hop artists, sparks enthusiast meetups around the world, supplies provocative names for nail varnish colours, and spawns social justice movements for reclaiming it from the patriarchy and Western hegemony. Have no doubt, The Future puts in long hours these days.

Sometime around 2016, in the shockwave following the unexpected outcomes of the Brexit referendum in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in America, the slow, steady drip of invocations about the future turned into a flood. On a trip to Singapore the following winter for a friend's wedding, I was accompanying my daughter through an H&M store as she checked

out the Christmas sales. I whiled away the minutes reading T-shirt slogans. ‘The Future is Female’ shouted one shirt. A sweatshirt entreated passers-by to ‘Undo The Future’. Another top declared a ‘Future Designed for the Present’. Not far away, a trucker hat touted ‘Alternative Futures’ in stark white type against a black background. Leaving the store, we passed a young shopper hustling down an escalator with a shopping bag from another retail chain sporting a glib, shiny ‘THE FUTURE DOESN’T WAIT’.

Airlines and financial institutions tease us with ‘Welcome to the Future’ advertisements on the jetway. Airports major and minor are festooned with panoramic ads from software makers, credit cards, management consultancies, watchmakers, and anyone else looking to ‘futurewash’ their products with the sheen of inevitability, each one exclaiming: You Are Here – Future Ground Zero.

Public discourse is inundated with futures imagined, projected and pronounced as a fait accompli. Professional conferences promise to reveal the certain future of X, and pack their agendas with brand mouthpieces, forecasters, artists or authors, yet almost all of these pep talks fail to address any real uncertainties. Most hint at conflicting narratives for us to grab hold of, and few acknowledge us as anything more than an audience – we are consumers to be swayed, lacking any agency other than getting on board with a comfortable, profitable or convenient narrative. Politicians hold the future hostage, but so do activists.

Sadly, much of public discourse, especially that which is delivered by mass media, gives us only a straw man debate – a false choice – of utopia or dystopia. We’re asked to make an assessment, take a position and fly our flag based on whether we are optimistic or pessimistic, as if any future somehow correlates clearly with one pole or the other. As if the future is an absolute. As my co-author Madeline Ashby put it a few years ago in a conference speech, ‘Your utopia is always somebody else’s dystopia.’ The offered narratives are made to feel universal, but points of view are relative. The debate is a proxy for support

of commercial or political platforms. The choice is: ‘Are you with us or against us?’

The future is hot right now because society is currently staring down several existential barrels simultaneously. The attacks of 9/11 pulled America – and by extension Europe – into a millennialist conflict of cultures pitched to us by the hardcore fringes (at both ends of the political spectrum) as the great conflict necessary to incite a major civilizational turning. Many new technologies are destabilizing established platforms which are necessary for sustainable existence, from economics and communication, to energy and biology. Desperate political shifts could, in some cases, lead us to anything from anarchy, to isolation, or even sudden death. And then there’s climate change: an absolute treated as if it were an opinion. An absolute where the cone of optionality is rapidly narrowing – although, importantly, it is still a multivariate space.

Political and economic visions, belief systems and cultures are all suddenly up for grabs. With the collapse or serious decay of many (mostly Western) critical narratives – like the social contract, popular democracy, human rights and the right to privacy – comes a need to either refresh and resuscitate these ideals, replace them with older, already failed and discredited options such as Marxism, neo-Enlightenment or extreme nationalism, or go all in with a clean slate future framed either by your favourite work of fiction or presented by global brands as an all-inclusive, one-size-fits-all new life, which begins with a revolutionary car, kitchen or phone, and extends outwards across a hygienically swept landscape. Flat-packed futures are there for us, waiting, and made to order.

Futures are there to be built

There is, of course, another option. You can take the initiative to probe possible futures yourself. As an individual. As a group,

unit or team. As an organization. As a movement. You can research, assess, construct and communicate versions and variations of futures to better understand probable, plausible and possible landscapes that lie ahead, regardless of the question, space or realm you wish to imagine, explore, plan for – or against. It takes a future, even a speculative, strange, uncanny or orthogonal one, to fill a vacuum, to expose and reduce uncertainty, to find new pathways towards opportunities and risks. Not doing is not knowing.

More concretely, you can become familiar with the tools used by strategists, innovators, designers, creators and forecasters to find and explore pieces of possible futures today. You can create a structure from the insights that emerge, map them in a way that makes sense to you, and prototype and share them as a way of engaging others to stress test them, then derive tangible decisions and realizations from them.

Doing this enough, with enough variation, will allow you to merge these acquired skills into your overall posture, in the face of the present, to be more aware and open to signals, and attain your own ‘scenaric stance’. In the words of futurist and co-founder of the Global Business Network Jay Ogilvy, the scenaric stance is a state of constructively maintaining multiple states of possibility in mind at the same time – considering, processing, evaluating, and being ready. Ogilvy tells us that in the face of greater challenges beyond utopia or dystopia – the false choice of unchecked optimism, or Cassandran pessimism – ‘we need some tools to handle the uncertainty and complexity of an unpredictable future’.¹

Ogilvy himself has been a leading innovator and proponent of future scenario tools. In his important paper quoted above, ‘Facing the fold, or from the eclipse of utopia to the restoration of hope’, he also wrote about the tragicomic times of our current civilization. Only a decade after he wrote this paper, many of us might be happy to trade up for tragicomic, given the spectrum of crises we face now. As of this writing, these include the need to protect and reinforce representative democracy, a clear strategy

for transitioning from carbon-based energy and extractive capitalism to something better for society, true equality in the face of new methods of segregation, not to mention that small matter of an existential battle against climate change.

Resetting leadership

Current conditions are reframing what defines good leadership. The idea of fixing a clear vision and pursuing it, regardless of changing circumstances, or even bending circumstances to fit the vision, sets an increasingly brittle stance in a world that's not only volatile but downright adversarial. Reactive repositioning when events are moving erratically, and at computational speed, merely leaves an organization responding defensively. Anticipating the potential terrain of a future, and deciding on confident action on that basis, means contributing to the formation and shape of that terrain.

Taking this approach to a higher level, as Ogilvy suggests above, not only means occasional acts of anticipation, but active, ongoing awareness of possible forces ahead, and the ability to make sense of the convergence or interaction of these forces, while steering proactively between emergent scenarios. This skill requires both an adaptable toolset and an adeptness and agility for using the tools within. It also means moving these tools out, towards the edges of organizations, and trusting those best positioned to sense change with the autonomy to act.

If, as we will describe in Chapter 1, everyone is charged with being a futurist in this environment, having a leadership role means providing the tools and means to support futuring with sufficient structure and clarity, then listening to what others discover or realize through using these tools. Leadership must enable a culture which supports the freedom to think and plan in non-linear ways, and views uncertainty as a material to build with, not as a risk to be mitigated. A successful future-facing

culture is built, in large part, through familiarity and comfort with the means, as well as the objectives, of futuring.

Tested tools for change

The book you're reading right now describes the tools and modes of futuring we use to achieve those aims. The processes contained here are useful for us when working on our many futuring engagements across various organizational settings, from straight commercial business R&D, to policymaking, to lighter ventures for exploratory illumination with start-ups, research groups, students or social initiatives. We're offering this book of compact tools and practices in the hope that they will be used in many ways, by many people. We believe that *How to Future* can be a thought starter, a tutorial, a process reference, a pocket guide, a situational compass and, possibly, though we hope infrequently, a fire extinguisher.

As authors sharing our own approach, our aspiration is that what we've written here will be used as a guide and reference for some of the steadily increasing population of people who don't necessarily seek to become expert futurists, but want to be better at thinking about the future themselves. To be fair, more expert futurists are always welcome, especially those who embody the underrepresented voices who haven't had access to shaping the futures they want to see, or who have been ignored in favour of the usual dominant voices. This book is for a wider audience that recognizes the importance of futuring as part of their ongoing professional or personal understanding of the future – how to see it, face it, navigate it and shape how it unfolds. It's also for anyone who suspects these capabilities might be useful, but don't yet have guidance on where or how, or with or for whom.

Who is the 'we' frequently reference here and throughout the book? While there is some use of a collective 'we' as a broad society in Chapter 1, 'we' for the most part refers to the small

team of practitioners who formally make up Changeist, the futures research and consulting company I founded in 2007. In immediate terms, ‘we’ is a way for myself and my contributing writer Madeline Ashby to speak collectively (though you will find some passages relaying our own experiences and views separately). In real terms, ‘we’ stands for the two of us, plus my partner at Changeist, Susan Cox-Smith, and a half dozen other talented practitioners who consistently work together under the Changeist flag. This book is the product of our collected experience, intended to inform, augment and improve yours.

As practitioners, we maintain a small, diverse and dedicated group of experienced strategists, consultants, producers and designers, all working together to break new ground in the fusion of strategic foresight, strategy, innovation and design. We’ve had the opportunity to work with an amazing spectrum of clients and partners, across more than 15 countries, in multiple languages and cultures. Over the years, the organizations we’ve worked with have ranged from some of the largest and most respected global brands in technology, media, health, food and mobility to prominent international governmental bodies and institutions, as well as national governments, foundations, and educational and cultural institutions.

Most recently, our work has been focused on enabling and strengthening entities in these latter sectors as they experiment with different ways of bootstrapping vital change and unlocking human capacity to drive change effectively. Throughout this book we try to use real examples from our own client engagements to give you insight into how these approaches played out in real life, and how our methods have been challenged or stretched in actual cases.

What we lay out in this book in terms of tools, methods and overall process, we have learned, modified and applied in different ways as part of our own projects. The chapters represent the phases we almost always pass through on any given piece of futuring work we do. The methods and frameworks within are either

adapted from those we ourselves have been taught or have picked up through work with other practitioners from futures and foresight, strategy, design, innovation, communications, policymaking and other realms. These, in turn, have been the approaches we've taught or facilitated as curricula in our own How to Future workshops, which we've run at various institutions across the US, Canada, Spain, the UK and the United Arab Emirates, and include our futures-related programmes taught over the past decade-plus at Duke University TiP, OCAD University, the Istituto Europeo di Design (IED), the School of International Futures, Dubai Future Academy and the Mohammed bin Rashid Center for Leadership Development. We are fortunate to work at the confluence of many vibrant communities and cultures of practice, and we owe much credit to the open flow of approaches and ideas that we have benefited from, and to which we continue to contribute.

Based on our own experiences, we had some clear objectives in mind when proposing this book. We didn't want to describe the highly formal, strictly bounded procedural congresses of foresight exercises of the past, featuring overflowing flipcharts and canvases teetering on easels, participants designated as chairpersons and deep-throated pronouncements from experts. Instead, we're offering less complex, more agile, more compact and more inclusive futuring exercises, just like the ones we've been privileged to design, facilitate, enable or instigate over our more than 15 years working around the world in a futuring capacity.

Some of the many contexts in which we hope this book can be a valuable tool may include cases where:

- working teams set out to explore different pieces or realms of futures as part of pathfinding workshops;
- a team plans to research and realize a range of possible futures within a sector in order to surface new innovation opportunities;
- groups from different organizations and fields use a multi-stage futuring exercise as a means of building or strengthening internal strategic capacity;

- an individual or a handful of people are tasked at short notice to develop a point of view on the future of a topic or theme within a few days, or weeks at most;
- a group of colleagues plan to spend a few hours in a canteen or coffee shop aligning and stretching their thinking on topics of strategic interest;
- students or other learners want to gain applied knowledge about different futuring practices to deepen or broaden their professional expertise;
- groups are looking to futuring tools as an ad hoc platform for world building for art, design, media and culture;
- writers or designers use futuring as a structured approach to prototyping or to situating innovations in a story, or other narrative form, to more effectively communicate possibility;
- a group working for a cause that is important to them need tools to map out a vision, based on a preferred future, which they can then share with others.

This list could go on, but the use cases above hopefully point to the intended flexibility of this book as a tool for learning, thinking and doing.

You should also know that we're agnostic about how you use the ideas presented in this book. What future you explore, what world you build, the topics you delve into, and the use to which you put them are up to you. Whether it's to scope a speculative landscape, develop a roadmap to preferable humanitarian futures, unpack the impacts of a potential policy, or sketch a scenario into which your product will be introduced (we've done all of these at some point), the tools and concepts here are social technologies – mechanisms for sparking the interaction, tension and dialogue that are necessary to realize new things. Depending on their application, they aren't entirely neutral, but they also aren't meant to be a rigid system. We hope you will put them to positive use, as we're living in the same complex system as you.

*NB: In the context of this book, we will refer to ‘The Future’ in the singular sense, with initial capitals, to reflect its role as a cultural, social or linguistic construct. Elsewhere you will find the term ‘futures’ used to refer to plurality of possibility, as yet undetermined. More on this distinction in later chapters.

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