

Critical Review of the Journal Foresight

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Introduction

Journals play a number of significant roles in the broad field of futures studies and applied foresight. So in mid-2007 I began a critical review of several - including *Foresight* - as part of the State of Play in the Futures Field (SoPiFF) project supported by the Seattle based Foundation for the Future (see Appendix 1). After considering the content and performance of the journal I concluded that, by that stage, it provided rather 'thin fare for a nascent discipline or field'. I added that while its publisher, Emerald, 'likes to promote itself as being 'international', 'relevant' and 'innovative' recent issues of *Foresight* 'do not support these aspirations.' It was 'hard to avoid the conclusion that the publisher has starved the journal of the support it needs in order to thrive' (Slaughter, 2009a). At the time I had no idea how prescient these comments would turn out to be.

Fast forward to 2012-3 when a colleague and I set out to propose a special issue on the topic of Descent Pathways. Descent, that is, as a meta-strategy for avoiding an impending system-wide collapse of the global system (Floyd & Slaughter, 2014). The latter had been canvassed for some three decades through projects such as the well-known (and widely abused) *Limits to Growth* (LTG) project and, in our view the thesis was supported by increasingly persuasive evidence (Bardi, 2011). 'Descent' can be seen as a way of handling, or even to some extent avoiding, collapse. We rehearsed some of the core notions during conference presentations given in Perth during December 2012. A proposal was put forward to the editor of *Foresight* and we were pleased to receive an enthusiastic acceptance. So we set to work looking for contributors and, over the following year or so, sourced a high quality collection of new material. We then ran into a long series of administrative problems such that to reach the stage of final submissions was more difficult and frustrating than we could have possibly expected. It contrasted vividly with past experience. Why, we asked, should this be so?

Some of the issues we encountered are outlined below. The point here is that they provided fresh motivation to take a new look at the field through the lens of the journal. Were earlier judgements correct? How, indeed, had the journal fared in recent years? Then, was I qualified to take it on? I assumed that I was. With a close to 30-year track record of publishing and editing I'd contributed as much to the futures literature - including journals - as any. I felt that I had the right and, indeed, the responsibility to perform this task (Appendix 2).¹ As has happened more than once I faced the question 'if I don't do this - who will'? As I progressed, however, I felt increasingly dismayed by what I found. While the focus here is on a single publication the implications are clearly much wider. As such they require collective attention. In other words this essay should be seen as a starting point, an invitation, not merely an end in itself.

Method

I began with a complete set of all 96 issues of the journal arranged on my desk in half a dozen library holders.² This made it easy to move back and forth through the series from Vol. 1 No. 1 in 1999 to Vol. 16 No. 6 in late 2014. Then, in order to obtain a clear sense of what had been published recently I decided to carry out a content analysis of the contents of the journal over the last five volumes. In so doing I also considered the 16 special issues that had appeared during that time. It did not take long to realise that concerns prefigured in the SoPiFF report were as relevant as ever. In fact they'd become yet more obvious. What could this mean? And what were the wider implications? I compared and contrasted the emerging picture of these recent volumes with the earlier ones edited by Colin Blackman.

It is necessary at this point to counter a couple of likely responses. First, that the present 'look back' involves some sort of nostalgic view of the past. I don't think that is the case as the issues raised here are based on facts – what existed earlier compared to what exists now - rather than feelings about those facts. A second concern might be that the present exercise constitutes some sort of broadside aimed at the current editor and in-house editorial staff. That is not the case either. The latter have mostly acted very professionally indeed and I advised the editor in writing that I did not consider him solely responsible for the sad state of affairs that we encountered. The real problem, as I came to see it, arose from developments in academic publishing and, specifically, the way that those developments affect journals, editors and contributors alike. If the underlying model is defective – and I believe it is - then we need to consider other options for sharing material and disseminating ideas.

The paper begins by reviewing the main conclusions of the earlier SoPiFF (State of Play in the Futures Field) study. It then uses four of the meta-scanning criteria employed there to analyse the contents of the last five volumes (from volume 12 to 16 inclusive). It looks at the special issues that comprise slightly over half of the 30 issues published over this 5 year period and derives some implications. Difficulties of liaising with an under-funded editorial system are outlined along with criticisms of Scholar One, the software used by the publisher. Some questions about ethics and intellectual property (IP) are raised and illustrated by reference to a specific paper. Finally a summary of issues is put forward for wider consideration and action.

Overview from the SoPiFF project

A meta-scanning framework developed at the Australian Foresight Institute has been applied to a range of issues (Ramos 2004). Perhaps the most significant of these was the State of Play in the Futures Field (SoPiFF) project published as a special issue of this journal in 2009 (Slaughter, R. [Ed.] 2009b). It has again been used here to systematically review the content of these volumes. The original framework employed 6 criteria:

1. Organisational type
2. Social interests
3. Methods
4. Focal domains
5. Capacity building, and
6. Country / location (Slaughter, 2009, p. 9).

It is relevant here to provide a sense of what emerged from the earlier exercise. Here are four key points and part of the conclusion from the lead article.

- There's much government work undertaken in the futures field, but it has primarily focused around science and technology foresight.
- There's much work being done with strategy in various forms, which means that organisations are exposed to, and using, futures approaches as long as there is someone in the organisation who thinks it is a good idea. However, there is little effort to tailor messages for the "person in the street" so that the imperative to think about the future everyday becomes clear and inescapable.
- There's a sense of inconsistency of quality and output in the field, which is generated from the vast array of people who call themselves futurists, and who do or don't have any formal training in the field.
- There's a strong and dominant focus on conventional, pragmatic, government-funded research into science, technology and economic questions. Such work is often of a very high quality but it also appears to be quite narrowly focused and based largely on the earlier and somewhat out-dated methods. *In the light of the deteriorating global outlook there is a need to move beyond this focus to incorporate a civilisational focus, and greater attention to longer-term global sustainability.* (Slaughter, 2009c, p.16-17, emphasis added).

Then in the conclusion four key meta-scanning insights were outlined, as follows:

Several unique perspectives have emerged regarding the nature and results of futures work. Four are of particular significance. The operation of *fundamental social interests* seems to have been a collective "blind spot" that has seldom, if ever, been subject to formal enquiry, and yet it clearly exerts powerful effects upon what is considered worth doing, and why. This study explored FS / foresight work through distinctions between pragmatic, progressive and civilisational interests. These by no means exhaust the options but they have succeeded in shining new light on the field. Similarly, the *range of methods* brought into play in any one context is heavily influenced by past experience and prevailing paradigms and we have seen some of the results of these unconscious selections. Also revealed here for the first time are some of the consequences of working in a limited number of *focal domains*, most commonly the "lower right," or "external collective" one. ³ *The overall lack of interest in, and capacity to address, the interior worlds of people, including*

practitioners themselves, is perhaps one of the clearest results of this study that calls for corrective action. Finally, this study has shown that the uneven approach to *capacity building* in futures enquiry and application warrants equal attention (Slaughter, 2009c p. 18, emphasis added).

Content and themes

For the purposes of this review the four central criteria were used: social interests, methods, focal domains and capacity building. The first of these – social interests – was deemed to be of primary significance as they are constitutive of theory and practice. The other categories, while significant in their own right, add what might be called ‘colour’ and ‘flavour’ in this context and were therefore applied more lightly. Nevertheless the results are not what were expected: the earlier conclusions of the SoPiFF study proved shockingly predictive.

Social Interests

One of the tenets of Critical Futures Study (CFS) is that in any account of futures or foresight work social interests need to be taken fully into account. (Indeed, one of the structural deficiencies in much early work was a singular refusal to recognise and open to this dimension.) It was a fact then, and it remains one now, that social interests provide much of the driving force, motivation and social resource(s) required for futures and foresight work to take place at all. They powerfully affect the selection of practitioners who are employed. They colour its character, purposes and operational details in a multitude of ways. In earlier work I defined three types of social interests in foresight as follows.

Pragmatic foresight is ... about carrying out today’s business better and, indeed, there is a range of fairly straightforward means by which foresight can be used to improve and extend current practice in a wide range of organisations. The fact that it is paradigmatically naïve does not reduce its usefulness in a taken-for-granted way. Most organisations can benefit from some use of pragmatic foresight and there are many consultants and consulting organisations that can supply it.

Progressive foresight ... contains some sort of explicit commitment to systemic improvement. Thus foresight in this mode can readily be linked with genuine attempts to reformulate business and organisational practices in the light of wider social and environmental concerns. Hence there is a strong link with what has been called ‘triple bottom line’ accounting, Factor 4, Factor 10 (terms that basically refer to ‘doing much more with less’) and many other such innovations. Such work is about going beyond conventional thinking and practices and reformulating processes, products, services using quite different assumptions.

Civilisational foresight ... seeks to understand aspects of the next level of civilisation – the one that lies beyond the current impasse, the prevailing hegemony of techno / industrial / capitalist interests. Civilisational foresight is perhaps the most fascinating and demanding domain of futures enquiry. It seeks to clarify just what might be involved in long term shifts towards a more balanced and sustainable world. By definition it draws on countless fields of culture and enquiry to set up notions of ‘design forward’. Such work allows us to speculate openly about such questions as: worldview design, underlying assumptions and values, civilisational myths and so on, as well as more down-to-earth matters such as infrastructure, governance and economic relations. (Slaughter, 2004, p. 217)

In order to assess the influence of each of these in volumes 12 – 16 each issue was reviewed and each paper assigned to the category that best fitted it. The raw totals are as follows:

Pragmatic focus:	94
Progressive focus:	65
Civilisational focus:	9

An obvious and immediate criticism is that such judgements are subjective, which is inarguable. Yet, at the same time, the numbers reveal a clear underlying reality that would likely not be greatly altered by other observers. The reason is that these works do, in a very real sense, ‘declare themselves’ quite openly. Well over half are devoted to here-and-now, broadly business-as-usual, administrative concerns. Progressive works are fewer but readily identifiable by their focus on improvement and / or innovation. They too are quite strongly represented. Finally, only a small minority of papers expressed or explored broader, more thorough going and longer-term civilisational concerns. It follows that despite various aspirational statements by the editor and publisher (see below) the good ship *Foresight* clearly runs mainly on heavy-duty pragmatism. As such it is precluded from dealing with the central questions of our time – what I’ve termed the ‘civilisational challenge’ and the emerging ‘global emergency’ (Slaughter, 2012).⁴

One reason for the dominance of pragmatism is that most of the guest edited special issues were derived from conferences and were largely or exclusively oriented toward science, technology and business / administration. This raises a couple of significant questions; first, about the implications of the underlying social interests and the agendas that appear to dominate these events; second, about the overall lack of editorial oversight that fails to detect or take any action to correct a clear and rather obvious bias.

Methods and focal domains

A similar bias was found in the types of methods addressed in these five volumes. Linear methods include various kinds of trend analysis, forecasting and

extrapolations. Systemic methods include systems modelling, scenario building and aspects of Earth Science. Critical methods employ the tools of critical enquiry that have emerged over recent years to deal with issues of social construction and cultural understanding. Finally, integral methods employ systematic approaches and multiple perspectives to understand 'reality' using a variety of ways of knowing. Linear and systemic methods were far and away the most commonly employed while critical and integral methods much less so. If this 'snapshot' is correct then the toolkit employed by practitioners does not appear to have changed greatly over the last decade. This clearly indicates a need for more detailed backup studies.

Interestingly, however, a similar picture emerged with 'focal (or 'reality') domains'. These cover 'structural', 'inter-subjective', 'behavioural' and 'psychological' domains. As with the earlier SoPiFF study, the main focus was on structural (empirical, real world) concerns, followed by inter-subjective (cultural and institutional), behavioural (how people act and behave) and, finally, to a far lesser degree psychological (subjective, value based, interior).⁵ Taken at face value this again suggests that the field as a whole may be continuing to focus on empirical and measurable phenomena to the detriment of, for example, underlying values and worldview commitments.

Capacity building

Finally, and again, as with SoPiFF, a good deal of attention was paid to conceptual foundations and also to methods and tools. Rather less was paid to enabling structures and processes. Very little attention at all was given to the social legitimation that arguably underlies successful foresight work and that, when achieved, assures its own future. In other words by far the greatest proportion of futures and foresight work still appears to be located within various administrative, organisational and business contexts. It barely exists in the wider world of public education, media discourse and local governance where, given the state of the world, it is arguably needed most of all. This is quite obviously not the fault of any one publication. But, equally, and again as above, it displays if not a deeply embedded bias then perhaps an unacknowledged passivity on the part of those responsible for policy and direction. A summary of the review thus far would include the following.

- The focus on technology remains strong and is arguably even more entrenched than previously.
- Pragmatic foresight carried out by and for currently dominant social interests remains dominant over these five volumes.
- Equally, perspectives from beyond the current nexus of social, political, economic and technical power remain significantly under-represented.
- The methods continue very much as described previously with linear and systemic methods remaining dominant; critical methods are used but far less frequently; integral methods remain scarce.

- Domains of enquiry remain dominated by structural and, to a lesser extent, inter-subjective phenomena; behavioural and psychological domains continue to be under-appreciated and under-utilised.
- Again as we saw with the earlier study capacity building remains fixated on conceptual foundations and methods; far less attention is paid to creating and sustaining enabling structures and processes; the issue of social legitimation for high quality foresight work is barely mentioned anywhere.

It seems clear from the above that the central conclusions of the SoPiFF project have fallen upon deaf ears. More importantly, however, it's clear that over the ensuing years very little attention has been paid to the 'deteriorating global outlook' or to the need to bring into foresight work 'the interior worlds of people, including practitioners themselves.' This is disappointing to say the least and shows that progressive recommendations of this kind – and the work they are derived from - have achieved surprisingly little traction. One key reason for this is almost certainly the oppositional 'headwinds' created by the dominance of neo-liberal market-oriented ideology. Few can now rationally doubt that they've proved powerfully destructive of many progressive and civilisational projects, to our collective cost (Oreskes & Conway, 2011; Klein 2014; Slaughter, 2014). Yet it is vanishingly rare for the nature and impact of those 'headwinds' to be mentioned – let alone openly discussed - in *Foresight*. It's difficult to interpret this as anything other than a kind of shared blindness or ideological naivety, neither of which are signs of health or vigour. Similarly, only a handful of papers or issues address the historically unprecedented expansion, growth and collective impacts of humanity. This is despite the well-proven fact that they continue to breach significant global boundaries that imply Dystopian consequences (Steffen, 2015).⁶ This alone is an extraordinary oversight. From this sample it appears that 'Foresight' has lost sight of its founding purposes.

It is worth repeating that no journal can be held responsible for this sad state of affairs. Futures publications are bound to reflect what might be called 'realities in the field.' The latter reflect the ideological prejudices and worldview commitments of the time, especially as promulgated by the rich and powerful.⁷ There is, however, another side to this – the fact that *the publishing and editorial process has completely failed to acknowledge the broader picture or to take any effective action to either address or compensate for these oversights*. One can see this clearly in the predominance of material sourced from S&T meetings that, by definition, are relevant only to a small minority of specialised people. It's not pushing the point too far to suggest that many – if not most - of them are motivated at least as much by pragmatic here-and-now interests and concerns as by progressive or civilisational ones. Indeed, if the latter can be found at all in these convocations of experts they have either been very quiet or their voices have been stifled. There are exceptions (mentioned below) but they are few in number. It follows that a significant proportion of the papers published over the last five years is of little or no value to those whose interests go beyond questions of technical strategy, administration and business. How much of this material is worthy of publication is, again, a matter of opinion. My own is that far too much of it resides, useless and virtually unreadable, in these five volumes.

Special issues

Table 1
Special Issues of Foresight 2010 – 14

Emerging methods and application areas in technology foresight (12, 2) *Conf.*
 Anticipatory systems and the philosophical foundations of futures studies (12, 3)
 Methodological issues in foresight studies (13, 2) *Conf.*
 Is Africa the land of the future?
 Diversifying the application fields of FTA-methods (13, 4)
 Foreseeing disruptive technological issues (13, 5) *Conf.*
 Foresight impacts from around the world (14, 1) *Conf.*
 Managing technological challenges in a globally connected business (14, 2) *Conf.*
 Diversifying the application fields of FTA-methods (2) (14, 4) *Conf.*
 Innovations in horizon scanning for the social sector (14, 6)
 FTA-approaches to identifying science and technology innovation developments (15, 1) *Conf.*
 The millennium project and beyond (15, 5)
 Managing the challenge of emerging technologies (15, 6) *Conf.*
 Key issues for global governance in 2030 (16, 2)
 Mining technology intelligence for policy and strategy development (16.3) *Conf.*
 Descent pathways (16, 6)

Table 2
Special Issues by subject matter

Technology

Emerging methods and application areas in technology foresight
 Diversifying the application fields of FTA-methods
 Foreseeing disruptive technological issues
 Managing technological challenges in a globally connected business
 Diversifying the application fields of FTA-methods (2 issues)
 FTA-approaches to identifying science and technology innovation developments
 Managing the challenge of emerging technologies
 Mining technology intelligence for policy and strategy development

Methods

Anticipatory systems and the philosophical foundations of futures studies
 Methodological issues in foresight studies
 Innovations in horizon scanning for the social sector

Global perspectives

Key issues for global governance in 2030
 Foresight impacts from around the world

The millennium project and beyond

Social / cultural

Is Africa the land of the future?
Descent pathways

Special issues provide a cheap and seductively easy way for journals to source new material since they utilise the voluntary labour of well-qualified people, most of whom are mid-level salaried employees of other organisations. The task is made even more straightforward when issues are direct outcomes of work presented at professional meetings since (a) the work is already at an advanced stage (b) there is normally a range of offerings to select from and (c) guest editors are easy to find and will work without remuneration.

During the period under review 16 of 30 issues were guest edited, i.e. just over half. Of these, eight were technology oriented. Three special issues dealt primarily with methods. Three addressed global concerns. Only two addressed social / cultural concerns. Nine of the guest-edited issues were produced from conferences and associated presentations. This array of voluntary labour represents a vast and mostly unacknowledged subsidy to the journal and, of course, the publisher.

Outstanding works

A different, but equally useful (and constructive) test, is to highlight works that stand out from what I think of as the 'techno/admin dross.' These are works that surprise one with their originality or relevance; works that one reads and that stay with one; works that are part of the wider conversations that ebb and flow through the futures domain. Some examples that stood out for me are as follows:

- Future strategy for reducing violence against women: the Italian experience (Zio, 2010)
- Anticipatory systems editorial (Miller & Poli, 2010)
- Civilisational futures within the integral framework: the plural quadrants (Morgan, 2010)
- The wise society: beyond the knowledge economy (Goede, 2011)
- Facing the fold: from the eclipse of Utopia to the restoration of hope (Ogilvy, 2011)
- Being without existing: the futures community at a turning point? (Miller, 2011)
- Dynamic foresight evaluation (Miles, 2012)
- Complexity science approaches to the application of foresight (Horton, 2012)
- The depth of the horizon: searching, scanning and widening horizons (Miles & Saritas, 2012)
- UN Millennium Development Goals and gender equality in employment in the Middle East (Littrell & Bertsch, 2013)
- Through the megacrisis: the passage to global maturity (Halal, 2013)

- Concepts and effects: ordering and practice in foresight (Bussey, 2014)
- Sense-making and acting for descent futures: human and cultural pathways (Floyd, 2014).

Overall there are perhaps 20 or 30 papers out of the 168 published over the five years that are worthy of careful attention. Much of the rest may be regarded as unproductive padding that serves the usual array of conventional interests. By contrast the best work brings new ideas to the table, reports on worthwhile research and projects, helps to re-define or shape the future of the enterprise and draws attention to global issues and problems. Once again it can be argued that this is merely a matter of opinion. Responses obviously depend on the interior structures of e.g. values, paradigms and worldviews. For example a business executive with a socio-centric worldview and entrepreneurial values will operate with a completely different set of priorities to a social activist with a world-centric worldview and post-materialist values. One will see the world as full of 'opportunities' while the other will perceive them to be interspersed with dangers that suggest a need for quite different kinds of social and other responses. What is really at stake here is the question - what really matters?

Reviews and the editorial board

Most issues carried one or more reviews, the vast majority of which were written by French editorial board member Jacques Richardson with a strong focus on French and European works. These reviews are always competent and articulate but it must be questioned if it is appropriate for a single voice to remain this dominant over the life of any journal. No explanation for this partiality has ever been provided. 12 of a possible 30 reviews were written by others. Yet only two of these were members of the editorial board. This is another extraordinary result. There's clearly no lack of talent or capacity in the current editorial board but there's certainly a distinct lack of engagement and interest. Neither the publisher nor the editor have apparently seen it as part of their shared task to reach out and engage meaningfully with the board or to source reviews more widely. This presents a stark contrast with the earlier issues edited by Colin Blackman (see below). It raises the question as to whether a surprisingly passive Editorial Board should take some responsibility for the rather sad state of affairs outlined here.

It's not inappropriate to mention that couple of decades ago Editorial Boards were actively engaged in journal editing and production. At that time it was common for members to meet in person to review and discuss policies and directions. Information was shared, opinions actively sought and exchanged. That is now an uncommon occurrence. Like much else in the digital era, board members have now vanished into the background, as it were. They've become remote and used mainly as unpaid writers or referees. In the absence of board meetings a vital fall back option is the annual review normally contributed by the journal editor (who is at least paid to carry out such tasks). In the case of *Foresight* the current editor provided annual overviews for volumes 12, 13 and 14. Volume 15 then departed from prior practice by featuring an editorial by a

guest editor. Volume 16 issue 1 then featured no annual introduction at all.⁸ So even this minimalist strategy for ‘communicating’ with authors, readers and the board seems to have been abandoned without any explanation. Moreover, beginning with that same issue the table of contents (TOC) at the front of the journal was also dropped. The index to contents now appears only on the outside back cover. I used to find the TOC helpful – not only to scan the contents themselves but also to make brief notes on early responses the articles themselves. Now the only option left is to scrawl on the back cover. The journal has been progressively pared down to what is beginning to resemble a dreary technical manual.

Offprints vs PDF

Regardless of their employment status (or lack of it) writers for academic journals have seldom received any payment whatsoever for their work. Rightly or wrongly only intangible and qualitative rewards have been available. For many years, however, one of the most useful and durable rewards for the long hours that writers devote to their craft was the subsequent arrival of a small stack of hard copy offprints. These could be readily distributed to students, colleagues and interested others. Unfortunately, however, the digital revolution seems to have put paid to that. Decision makers and accountants quickly saw how costs could be reduced and profits enhanced by declaring that everything went on-line. In most cases there was little or no consultation involved. Such changes ‘just happened.’

Foresight was never particularly generous in this respect but I recall receiving maybe half-a-dozen full sized offprints of some early papers - which was something. This now-defunct practice can perhaps be as the last tangible evidence of any real sense of courtesy or mutuality between the journal and those whose work provides its rationale and *raison d’être*. From then on it seems to have become merely an attenuated transactional exchange – ‘just business.’ Now instead of offprints authors are fortunate if they are sent a clean and correct PDF of their work. Even here there’s a further regression that one-sidedly benefits the publisher. That is, the early PDFs were clean copies of the printed material. A cover page was subsequently added with relevant details of the journal. Now each paper has an ugly full-page header that drives home the uncompromising message that the paper is the property of the publisher. This, let it be noted, is regardless of whether the author has transferred copyright to the publisher or not.

There’s a further and highly significant further twist to this story. At the time of writing the vice-president of Google, Vint Cerf, has been reported as saying that we face a ‘forgotten generation, or even a forgotten century’ as a result of what he termed ‘bit rot.’⁹ Cerf added that ‘we are nonchalantly throwing all our data into what could become an information black hole without realising it’ (Sample, 2015). Which raises the question as to why a journal dedicated to promoting *foresight* practices around the world would itself passively follow the trend in this risky direction without major questions being raised - if not by the publisher’s employees then by the board. Or to put it differently, the remaining

offprints in author's studies could, like their hard copy books, still be around long after the present generation of PDFs becomes unreadable.

Writing and editing for Foresight

Senior members of the futures and foresight community will recall that the editors of leading journals used to be full-time employees working in well-established offices with appropriate administrative support. Working with them was pretty straightforward and mostly satisfying. Communications, although slower in general, were usually clear and timely which meant that the logistics attending the publication of papers and special issues were largely hassle-free. The publishing software that now dictates process and issues streams of barely comprehensible, non-negotiable directives did not exist. There were no login issues or hassles with passwords and security software. Nowadays, and with a few exceptions, things have changed. Editors are themselves under severe pressure since most work part-time, use their home or professional offices and have few or no support staff.¹⁰ That these changes have undermined the previous system became abundantly clear when in 2012 my co-editor and I unwittingly took on the task of guest editing a special issue of *Foresight*.

Things started out well but we soon discovered that the editor could not be reached for long periods of time. At other times we heard from an occasional hard-pressed assistant or, worse, the software. This can be frustrating since these systems only provide limited pre-set options. They are set up to 'nudge' authors who are required to respond. The undeniable fact that one cannot, in any way, communicate with software seems to have been forgotten. In our case assurances were given and then broken. Questions went unanswered. A case in point is a review that I'd been specifically asked to write a year earlier. It was put 'on hold' and only re-appeared when, finally, I asked the editor what had happened. No explanation was forthcoming, however, despite repeated requests. The review itself (which had taken me a pleasant but full-on week to write) had somehow been 'lost' in the system. Yet no one at all was prepared to say why. Several contributors to the special issue also became unhappy about how they were being treated. Further mistakes occurred during the production process that took all of 9 months and some tenacious work to finally be resolved.¹¹ I was never able to discover why my personal email address had been placed on the system without my knowledge or permission.¹²

Academics publish for various reasons but primarily because they must do so in order to progress in their careers. They also want to be recognised by, and contribute to, a community of enquirers and practitioners. Neither of these is seen as income related since most writers are assumed to be academics or others in full employment. Those who are self-employed, between positions, have family duties, or are perhaps retired are, however, hugely disadvantaged. The convention that publishers will *only* publish if the work is given to them free of charge must be challenged and eventually removed. Similarly the common requirement that, as a condition of work being accepted, authors must re-assign copyright from themselves to the publisher should also be dropped. Both are fundamentally unethical.

For many years now I've exercised the standard legal right that exists in Australia to retain copyright for my work. Instead I've used a licence and my co-editor Josh Floyd recently established that a non-exclusive Creative Commons licence is also a viable option. Yet the software platforms used only provide for the former. There's no option to access the licence option even though it has been available for years. If the writer perseveres long enough one may eventually arrive. Overall, what has become unavoidable is that we are witnessing the re-establishment and renewal of 19th Century crony capitalism in which the owners take all. This is a practice that has been vastly expanded and taken to dangerous new levels of exploitation by the IT revolution. While continuing to preach 'freedom and access for all' it actively removes power, income and autonomy from individuals and professionals alike and awards them to the companies that own the 'means of production and distribution' (Morozov, 2013).

A paper from 2012 provides a relevant example. I well remember the process of writing it as a long and testing struggle that extended over several weeks. This is not an exaggeration. I'd seen a couple of papers that raised questions that kept recurring. So I decided to 'take on' and respond to two of the brightest and most capable people in the futures and foresight world: Jay Ogilvy and Riel Miller. So, as might be expected, sitting down to actually write it proved challenging. The piece went through many drafts that were subsequently revised yet again in the light of referee's comments. I was delighted to finish it but it was certainly one of the most difficult and demanding pieces I've ever written.

When I looked up the Emerald site to find out how many times it had been downloaded the answer was 229 times. The current cost of viewing this and every other paper published by Emerald is given as \$32. A simple multiplication suggests that the publisher could have received a maximum income from this single paper of over \$7,000. So, if, over a decade or so any author wrote 10 papers, edited or co-edited a couple of special issues and wrote a few reviews he or she may well have generated something in the region of \$70,000 dollars for the publisher. Such figures exclude the journal subscriptions from universities, governments and businesses. Colleagues who reviewed an earlier draft of this paper pointed out that publishing finances are far more complex than this. So the fact is that there's no way to know for certain what the actual figures are. What is more certain is that the practice of selling our work 'over our heads' as it were needs to be challenged and changed.

A broken model?

The Descent Pathways special issue goes against the grain of what has been discussed here in that it attempts to highlight and explore 'foresightful' and reasonably intelligent responses to the prospect of civilisational collapse. It is an issue that should concern us all – but rarely seems to do so (Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 2012; Klein, 2014). If the recent contents of *Foresight* are any indication it has dropped off of the radar of many writers and practitioners. It's precisely here that the most significant and concerning silence at the heart of the journal emerges. Statements provided by the editor and publishers over the period

reveal good intentions and plans for the future but, sadly, no vision. By that I mean a sense of the wider picture as our over-extended, badly out-of-control world staggers through the second decade of the 21st century towards manifestly challenging and quite likely disastrous futures. Again, the point is not to blame anyone for defective governments and the continuing disasters of the wider civilisational crisis. Yet in this very specific context it is surely a mistake to ignore these issues and continue as if business-as-usual had any residual meaning. Broadly speaking, a predominance of techno-administrative material is at best marginally helpful and at worst diversionary.

And yet that, really, is the subtext of much of the work published in *Foresight*. Taken together it reflects a well-known and widespread dissociative mentality that edits out the dire prospects we are all confronted with by looking in the other direction, evading and denying reality and working overtime to pursue multiple technical and administrative tasks within largely here-and-now organisational settings. This is the real tragedy of a journal that is supposedly intended to help equip the present generation of foresight practitioners. *Instead of exploring alternative futures for applied foresight informed by what we currently know about the global system it continues to inscribe ever more deeply the defective, catastrophe-prone present.*

A cynical view of the journal would assert that none of this is surprising if you assume that it has merely become a cash cow for the publisher. As such, the content can and should be allowed to drift regardless. But it does not take a genius to recognise that there are problems with that view. For example, if the drift were to continue fewer people or organisations would be willing to pay for it. Similarly, if we ask – does it serve the profession? – it is reasonable at this point to say ‘not in any meaningful sense.’ While it may well serve those working within the ‘techno-organisational’ realm it most certainly does not serve those who see further and seek a more nourishing and helpful diet. In fact it does not serve authors of any persuasion very well at all well. This model is, in a word, broken. The profession should be scandalised and make it very clear to all concerned that it deserves and requires better.

As this paper was being finalised two other significant developments occurred. One was that the publisher decided to cease issuing hard copies of the journal to editors, authors and the editorial board. Our Descent Pathways issue was the very last to be printed and distributed. No one was consulted about this. It was another in-house decision made on the usual grounds of efficiency and the alleged increased efficiency of digital-only media. The editorial board was again shown that its input was neither required nor its existence valued. Hard copies of the journal could now be purchased individually but no information was provided regarding these new costs. A person at head office was to be contacted. When I did this I was provided with the figures. But I was also told that this information was ‘commercial in confidence.’

Commercialisation and digitisation are not necessarily and of themselves ‘bad’ things, so to speak. What matters is how the human, organisational and economic aspects are expressed and implemented. In this case it is hard to avoid

the conclusion that the decline of a once-vital journal continues. It will take effort, courage and imagination to re-vitalise it or, alternatively, to replace it with something that better meets the needs of the field and its practitioners.

Conclusion: what should be done?

The whole point of this article is to suggest ways forward. So here are some suggestions that need to be widely debated and selectively put into practice.

- We assume that the decline of *Foresight* needs to be arrested and reversed. To do so will require an overhaul of the funding model and a review of personnel associated with it.
- The awkward issue of editorial time and capacity needs to be urgently addressed. As does that of the adequate financing.
- The ‘motherhood’ statements that have appeared in the journal need to be replaced by a clear articulation of values, purposes and priorities.
- The content of the journal urgently needs to be reviewed. Six issues a year of medium to poor quality are excessive and unhelpful.
- More explicit guidelines are needed to solicit submissions that go beyond the current preoccupation with techno-administrative concerns. If the present trend continues it may well be the death of the journal.
- The board needs to take a much more active interest especially in terms of the issues raised here.
- The editor needs to communicate with the board and with others to ensure a continuing multi-threaded conversation.
- The whole process of sourcing and publishing reviews needs to be overhauled.
- The contents page should be restored.
- The practice of routinely issuing offprints should be re-established. Where PDFs are employed legalistic publisher ‘noise’ should be reduced or eliminated.
- The software currently used to manage submissions needs to be overhauled and made much more user-friendly. Specifically it should *not* be used to conceal editorial absences. Private email addresses should never be used without formal permission.
- Legitimate, work-related messages of authors and guest editors should not go unanswered for more than an agreed time: say 24-48 hours.
- At the submission stage authors should be openly given the option of either re-assigning copyright or adopting a licence.
- Proofs of submitted and copyedited work should be made available to authors for checking. In-house mistakes and omissions should be automatically corrected.

If items such as these can be taken seriously and put into practice then there is some hope that the current decline of the journal can be arrested. Yet, given the

commercial imperatives at work, I wouldn't bet on it. So, finally there's a different conversation to be had about how the field of futures studies and applied foresight can or should emulate professional arrangements employed by other credible fields, i.e. by taking responsibility for their own core publications. *The most serious issue in the current context is that our work continues to be appropriated and the economic value it represents lost to the field.* I invite all concerned readers to stop and think, to consider what should be done, by whom and when.

Note on reviewers' contributions

Although this article was obviously written by an individual the issues raised are clearly of broader significance. It follows that the wider any subsequent conversation can become the better. A step toward that process was the circulation of earlier drafts of the paper to no less than eight well-qualified reviewers from around the world. I'm grateful to each of them for their direct and uncompromising comments, many of which have been addressed in the paper. Some other key points are summarised below, along with brief bracketed responses.

It may be unfair to concentrate on a single journal. (Agreed. But the process had to start somewhere. It is arguably beyond the capacity of any one individual to survey the whole field in similar depth. Indeed, it would be preferable for a number of people to carry out this work as it would help to compensate for individual biases.)

What is published in any one journal is not necessarily representative of work being carried out in the field, especially when some of it may be commercial in confidence. (Perhaps. It's clearly a sample. Equally, one of the most highly respected reviewers actually stated the opposite by declaring that the paper does indeed constitute 'a true representation of the field now.')

Starting with one publication is OK but the context needs to be broadened. (Agree entirely but suggest that this is beyond the scope of any but a full-time researcher or team.)

Is it reasonable to critique *Foresight* for lacking a 'civilisational' focus when it is mainly intended for practitioners? (I get the point but wonder about the implications of these practitioners plying their trade without locating it more explicitly in a clear and explicit understanding of the threatened / unstable global context. Surely we all now live in the 'overshoot' world?)

Many of the problems identified in the article arise – at least in part - from wider technical developments. (Agreed. Which suggests that far more attention needs to be paid to these very same developments. Morozov, 2013, is an excellent place to begin. Which is why his book is referenced here.)

Appendix 1

Critical Overview of Foresight, SoPiFF Project, 2007

Foresight was established by Colin Blackman in 1999 initially under the Camford imprint. Blackman was previously the editor of *Futures* and, in many ways, this was an attempt to branch out in a fresh direction. Initially it succeeded. It was described as:

A bimonthly international and interdisciplinary journal providing a strategic view on the future. It publishes peer-reviewed articles, shorter comment pieces, essays, reports, book reviews and other regular features. *Foresight* will be an important vehicle for the publication of research, business analysis and policy-making on social, political, economic, technological and environmental issues that demand a long-term perspective. *Foresight* aims to direct futures thinking more effectively to provide practical guidance for today's decision makers in business and government.

During this early period the journal carried a rich array of offerings. The main papers covered a wide range of topics from a variety of points of view. Crucially, these were balanced by other items including: reports from meetings, book reviews, publications received, a conference calendar and, last but not least, a stimulating column by Andy Hines called *Hinesight*.

After a short time *Foresight* was purchased by Emerald which had been in existence for 40 years and, by 2007, published over 150 journals. Blackman continued as editor but his budget and creative control were greatly reduced such that by 2007 it was not uncommon for issues of the journal to appear comprised only of papers. An attempt to establish a new series of regular columns failed because the publisher refused to fund it.

Always more practitioner-oriented than *Futures*, *Foresight* also seemed to become increasingly preoccupied with what might be called 'futures / foresight technique' with less attention to questions of value, purpose and meaning. By 2007 the editorial scope was described in the following way:

Foresight invites contributions that provide a long-term perspective on important social, economic, political, technological and environmental issues. The journal is aimed at a business, policy making and academic audience. Articles should draw out the practical implications for decision makers in business and government (and) short articles and comment pieces on topical issues are particularly encouraged.

By mid 2007 the trends outlined above were unmistakable. A look at the last ten issues (back from vol 9 no 3, 2007) revealed only 11 book reviews, most of which were written by Jacques Richardson and dealing almost exclusively with French publications. During that period there were no columns and only 2 conference reports. While the value and overall quality of the papers published are not in question, this is clearly very thin fare for a nascent discipline or field.

While Emerald likes to promote itself as being ‘international’, ‘relevant’ and ‘innovative’ recent issues of *Foresight* clearly do not support these aspirations. In fact it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the publisher has starved the journal of the support it needs in order to thrive.

Slaughter, R. Background research note, SoPiFF Project, 2007.

Appendix 2

Contributions to Foresight by the author 1999 - 2014

Papers

Slaughter, R. A new framework for environmental scanning, *Foresight* 1, 5, 1999 pp. 441-51.

Slaughter, R. Knowledge creation, futures methodologies and the integral agenda, *Foresight* 3, 5, 2001 pp. 407-418.

Slaughter, R. From forecasting and scenarios to social construction: changing methodological paradigms in futures studies, *Foresight* 4, 3, 2002 pp. 26-31.

Slaughter, R. Waking up after the war, *Foresight* 7, 3, 2005 pp. 9-21.

Slaughter, R. Is America ‘the land of the future?’ *Foresight* 10, 4, 2008 pp. 4-27.

Slaughter, R. Is America ‘the land of the future? A response’ *Foresight* 10, 5, 2008 pp 60-64.

Slaughter, R. The state of play in the futures field: a metascanning overview, *Foresight* 11, 5, 2009 pp. 6-20.

Slaughter, R. & Riedy, C. Understanding and resolving the global problematique: assessing the balance between progressive and socially conservative foresight, *Foresight* 11, 5, 2009 pp 21-39.

Slaughter, R. Sense making, futures work and the global emergency, *Foresight* 14, 5, 2012 pp. 418-31.

Slaughter, R. The denial of limits and interior aspects of descent, *Foresight* 16, 6, 2014 pp. 527-549.

Reviews

Slaughter, R. Review of Taylor, G. Evolutions’s Edge: The Coming Collapse and Transformation of Our World, *Foresight* 11, 2, 2009 pp. 63-4.

Slaughter, R. Review of Loveridge, D. Foresight: The Art and Science of Anticipating the Future, *Foresight* 11, 5, 2009 pp 80-84.

Slaughter, R. Review of Entropia: Life Beyond Industrial Civilisation, *Foresight* 16, 3, 2014 pp. 289-91.

Editorials

Slaughter, R. Editorial for The 'state of play' in the futures field, *Foresight* 11,5, 2009 pp. 3-5.

Slaughter, R. & Floyd, J. Editorial for Descent pathways, *Foresight* 16, 6, 2014 pp. 485-495.

Appendix 3 Other conclusions from the SoPiFF project

- There appears to be a significant amount of duplication, redundancy and overlap in the field. In many places the same, or similar, kinds of expertise and disciplinary paradigms, appear to operate “in parallel” with more or less (and usually less) interconnection and coordination. Overall, FS / Foresight work appears to be poorly coordinated internationally, and collaboration among futurists is limited.
- Quality control in the field remains problematic. There appear to be remarkably few attempts at oversight and evaluation of futures work worldwide.
- In terms of the metascanning categories, there appear to be remarkably few broad-based and solidly grounded organisations. Most seem to occupy a small or mid-range part of the territory, thus defined. Hence there is value in looking at the field through these particular lenses.
- Reductionism appears to be common in the field, as is the adherence to older and less comprehensive methods. If it is indeed a generational issue then change will be slow.
- While FS / foresight work is clearly widespread in business and government circles it appears to be extremely rare in educational contexts. Considerable work also needs to be done to balance work around the future *of* individual fields and technologies with work to embed the futures imperative *in* education, and *in* political and social processes and institutions. Yet few appear to have grasped the centrality of this shift from “of” to “in.”
- Finally, the need to build the foresight capacity of individuals is clear as individuals influence government and organisational decision making. Therefore existing work on understanding how individuals begin to think consciously and overtly about the future needs to be more widely available. Equally, new work arising from integral and other sources should be given due critical regard by practitioners (Slaughter, 2009, p.16-17).

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Brief Bio

Prof. Richard A. Slaughter is a writer, practitioner and innovator in Futures Studies and Applied Foresight with a particular interest in Integral Futures. During 1999-2004 he was Foundation Professor of Foresight at the Australian Foresight Institute, Melbourne. During 2001-2005 he was President of the World Futures Studies Federation. He is the author or editor of some 20 books and many papers on a variety of futures topics and Board member of several journals. His recent works include: *The Biggest Wake Up Call in History* (2010) and *To See With Fresh Eyes – Integral Futures and the Global Emergency* (2012). He has won three awards for ‘Most Important Futures Works’ from the Association of Professional Futurists. In 2010 he was voted one of ‘the best all-time Futurists’ by members of the Foresight Network, *Shaping Tomorrow*.

Notes

¹ One reviewer suggested that I make specific reference to a 1989 paper I wrote as it constitutes an earlier overview of futures work, thus establishing a long-term concern for issues of this kind. See Slaughter, R. 1989.

² Little did I know at the time that this would be the very last moment that such an operation could be undertaken. Volume 16, 6, 2014 was the last hard copy issue of the journal.

³ For an authoritative source on Integral methodology see Wilber, 2000.

⁴ The suggestion that ‘hands on practitioners’ need not be concerned with such matters is one that I believe should be rejected. It may not be a primary focus of specific projects but all live within the current ‘overshoot’ world.

⁵ See Slaughter 2009c for details of these categories.

⁶ See Brook 2015 for a critique of simple views and uses of notions of planetary boundaries.

⁷ For example at the time of writing two recent events in Queensland have clearly exposed the dominance of regressive planning initiatives. First, there are in play competing proposals to build several more very large and ambitious casinos. These produce large profits but are also well understood to be social parasites that dominate whole localities both visually and economically. Second a new Queensland premier has given the go-ahead to an Indian company for the further development and expansion of coal mining in the Galilee Basin. As is usually the case, the rationale mentions jobs and wellbeing in the short term. But the long-term consequences of this kind of activity are deliberately obscured. In both cases the complete lack of high quality foresight – or any foresight at all – once again shows how insoluble problems for the future are created through ignorance and power in the present.

⁸ Vol 17 No 1 also lacked this essential feature.

⁹ This is not news to those who’ve been paying attention. I used to call this the ‘archive problem’ until I discovered that others had coined the term ‘digital

continuity' (or 'discontinuity'). It remains an unresolved and widely overlooked problem.

¹⁰ This has also been illustrated recently by the near-demise of the WFS journal *World Future Review*. Its editor was recently sacked and then re-employed for a couple more issues. The former Maryland offices of the WFS are no more.

¹¹ In the case of the editorial and at least three of the papers new errors were introduced into the text after final submission along with some truly atrocious copyediting. For example in my own paper I found 27 such errors. The papers were submitted mid-2014. Corrections were finally achieved in March 2015.

¹² This resulted in a series of false messages (and responses to those messages) that came back to me well after I'd passed over responsibility for the material.