

A critical review of the journal Foresight

by Richard Slaughter

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. I concluded that, at that stage, it provided rather ‘thin fare for a nascent discipline or field’. While its publisher, Emerald, likes to promote itself as being ‘international’, ‘relevant’ and ‘innovative’ recent issues of *Foresight* ‘do not support these aspirations.’ (Slaughter, 2009a)

Fast forward to 2012-3 when a colleague and I started work on a special issue on the topic of Descent Pathways (Floyd & Slaughter, 2014). All started well but we soon ran into a series of administrative problems that suggested another look at the journal was required. I carried out a content analysis of the last five volumes and soon discovered that the concerns prefigured in the SoPiFF report were as relevant as ever. This article summarises the longer and more thorough analysis.

SoPiFF Overview

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 *Foresight* in 2009 (Slaughter, R. [Ed.] 2009b). Two key points emerged from this work.

First, in the light of the deteriorating global outlook, we identified a need for thinking and practice to move beyond generally pragmatic concerns to incorporate a civilisational focus that better balances these with longer-term global concerns.

Second, that the field was skewed in various ways. That is in relation to dominant social interests, the rather traditional range of methods and the operational or ‘focal’ domains involved. The latter dealt with external and empirical phenomena but largely ignored the interiors of individuals and cultures (Slaughter, 2009c, p.16-18).

Content and themes

The original framework employed six criteria: organisational type; social interests; methods; focal domains; capacity building, and country or location (Slaughter, 2009c, p. 9). For the purposes of this review the four criteria used were: social interests, methods, focal domains and capacity building. Volumes 12-16 were reviewed and each paper assigned to the categories that best applied.²

Figure:

Social interests (expressed through types of foresight)³

The raw totals were:

Pragmatic focus: 94

Progressive focus: 65

Civilisational focus: 9

Source: Richard Slaughter

One of the purposes of Compass, as of the APF more broadly, is to enable critical analysis and discussion of issues that affect good futures practice. To this end, we are introducing a slot, Perspectives, which will act as a forum for such critiques. In this inaugural piece Richard Slaughter, and below, Oliver Markley, ask if the journal Foresight, as it currently operates, serves the best interests of the futures field. (AC)



¹ Questions of method and approach obviously arise here. They are addressed in the original paper.

² See research note on this topic: http://richardslaughter.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Social_Interests_Foresight.pdf

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Well over half were devoted to here-and-now, broadly business-as-usual, administrative concerns. Progressive works were fewer but readily identifiable by their focus on improvement and/or innovation. They too were quite strongly represented. Finally, 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 the good ship *Foresight* still 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 'global emergency' (Slaughter, 2012). One reason for the dominance of pragmatism is that it fits very comfortably within the status quo. Another is that most of the guest-edited special issues were derived from conferences that were largely oriented toward science, technology and business / administration. Is this the future of *Foresight* – or its demise?

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 use 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 multiple perspectives to understand 'reality' through 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 is correct then the 'toolkit' employed by practitioners has changed little over the last decade.

Oliver Markley writes:

My experience getting a peer reviewed article published with the Emerald Group Publishing journal *Foresight*, was such a series of frustrations that I strongly advise colleagues to avoid professional interaction with this journal.

My story is this: I was initially invited by Richard Slaughter to contribute to double special issue of *Foresight* that he and Joshua Floyd were editing on the topic of Descent Pathways. The peer review process took a whole year, with no response to the peer mandated revision I submitted for some months, and no response at all from the editor when I asked what the hold up was. Meanwhile, Slaughter and Floyd had their own difficulties, such that they were not able to go with a second issue, so my article could not be included as intended.

Then the editor tried to censor my mentioning the details of this editorial overrun in my article, even

though it was central to the development of my narrative. When I demurred, a delay of many months ensued, with more lapses of communication from the editor about what was happening. Finally, I got instructions to resubmit my article, which I did, only to get an automated response that my article had already been published. When I checked their website, I saw that indeed it had, but absent a list of acknowledgments.

When I complained, the editor's publication assistant said that they had not received any acknowledgment, so I sent them my copy of the original galley proofs that had the acknowledgments in the correct form. They promised to do a post-publication revision adding them back in, but several weeks have passed, and still no revision on their website. And it took me several weeks to even get the promised access to download my own article from their site.

All told a very bad experience.

A similar picture emerged with 'focal (or 'reality') domains'. These cover 'structural', 'inter-subjective', 'behavioural' and 'psychological' phenomena.

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).³ Taken at face value this again suggests that the field as a whole continues to focus mainly on empirical and measurable phenomena to the detriment of, for example, recognising the shaping power of 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 legitimisation 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 governance where it is arguably needed most of all.

This is quite obviously not the fault of the journal. 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.

³ See Slaughter 2009c for details of these categories.

- 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 and voices from beyond the current nexus of social, political, economic and technical power remain significantly under-represented.
- The methods continue very much as

Special issues provide a cheap and easy way for the journal to source new material, since they use volunteer labour that subsidises the journal

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 legitimisation for high quality foresight work is barely mentioned anywhere.

It appears, therefore, that the journal has lost sight of its founding purposes. Equally, the publishing and editorial process has failed to acknowledge the broader picture or take any effective

action to either address or compensate for these oversights.

This is clearly evident in the predominance of material sourced from S&T meetings that, by definition, are relevant only to a small minority of specialised people. It follows that a significant number of papers is of little or no value to those whose interests go beyond 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 volumes.

Special issues provide a cheap and seductively easy way for the journal 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. During the period under review 16 of 30 issues were guest edited. Of these, eight were technology oriented. Three special issues dealt primarily with methods. Three addressed global concerns. 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 its publisher. In the original paper I

⁴ Considering the number of works I've published in this journal, and the cost of downloading each one, I may have generated something in the region of \$70,000 for the publisher over the last decade. This may be an overestimate but see original paper.

More broadly, our work continues to be appropriated, sold and re-sold 'over our heads,' its economic value lost to the futures field

also discuss reviews, the editorial board, PDFs vs. offprints and the way that authors are expected to sign away their rights to their work without recompense.⁴

Conclusion: solutions?

If the decline of *Foresight* is to be arrested it will require an overhaul of the funding model as well as a review of editorial policy and capability. Core values, purposes and priorities need to be clearly articulated and content urgently reviewed.

Six issues a year of medium to poor quality are excessive. Improved guidelines for submissions are required that go beyond the current preoccupation with techno-administrative concerns. The board needs to take a much more active interest and the editor provided with sufficient resources to interact with it. The whole process of sourcing and publishing reviews needs to be overhauled and the recently abandoned contents page restored. For reasons set out elsewhere the practice of issuing hard copy offprints should be resumed.⁵

The software currently in use is clunky and confusing. It needs to be much more user-friendly and not be employed to conceal all-too-frequent editorial absences. Authors should be openly given the option of either re-assigning copyright or adopting a licence. It's encouraging that

⁵ Hard copy handouts are useful over extended periods of time. They do not vanish due to technical glitches or suffer from 'digital decay.'

⁶ Some of the later difficulties that my co-editor and I faced resulted from errors and inadequate copy editing in the absence of a proofing stage.

proofs of submitted and copy edited work will soon become standard practice.⁶

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 – such as taking responsibility for their own publications. The most serious error in the current context is that our work continues to be appropriated, sold and re-sold 'over our heads,' its economic value lost to the field. I invite all concerned readers to stop, think and consider what should be done, by whom and when. Leaving core publications in the hands of commercial publishers who clearly have no interest either in the field or the global emergency itself is poor practice and not very 'foresightful.' ◀

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Richard Slaughter is based at Foresight International in Brisbane, Australia. He divides his time between futures work, photography and, when possible, four grandchildren.

He is perhaps best known for editing the multi-volume anthology: *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*; for establishing the Australian Foresight Institute in Melbourne and for various papers and books on futures studies and applied foresight.

The full version of this article can be found under Futures Archive at: <http://richardslaughter.com.au>