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Futures studies as a civilizational catalyst

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Abstract

By the early 21st century, Futures Studies (FS) had developed into a globe-spanning meta-discipline with a range of methodologies, a rich literature and a substantial knowledge base. A small, but growing, number of universities around the world provided advanced degrees in FS. Yet, in spite of the wide use of futures methods such as the Delphi technique, trend analysis and scenario planning in pursuit of corporate strategies, substantive futures perspectives focused on long-range civilizational concerns remained underdeveloped or absent within most organizations and environments. This paper considers the rise of FS during the 20th century, some implications for FS of what I have called the ‘civilizational challenge’ and a number of strategies that may be used to increase the take-up and effectiveness of futures work over coming decades. The paper takes the view that the ultimate goal of FS at this time is to help create the foundations of a new civilization. © 2002 Richard A. Slaughter. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Rise of FS

The rise of Futures Studies (FS) during the latter half of the 20th century occurred for reasons that may best be described as ‘macro historical’ or ‘civilizational’ in nature. That is, FS grew and developed as a result of the new historical context created by modernity. Over a few decades, a century at most, humankind was projected into a completely new world context. The growth dynamic that had driven industrialization, colonization and capitalist expansion ran up against a world of physical limits. A ‘sixth extinction’ was declared as many wild species were pushed over the edge by human activity. The confidence of high industrialism evaporated. The rise of science and the rapid spinning-off of entirely new branches of technology

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opened up new worlds, new options, that were eagerly exploited by corporations in their search for competitive advantage and market share. Unfortunately the long-term social implications of incessant innovation were largely overlooked. Meanwhile, the future, which had once unfolded naturally and organically from the past, now became problematic. It no longer arose from the steady working out of blind, unregarded processes, but increasingly became contingent upon the actions and decisions of people, organizations and societies. In other words, during the 20th century the future became an artefact, a focus of legitimate enquiry, something that one could begin to understand, conceptually grasp and seek to influence. Hence, during this period, responsibility for the future devolved directly upon a range of human agencies.

The nature of that influence and the possibility of human agency varied widely. For then, as now, a majority of the world's people just wanted clean water, decent food, education, work and healthy children. Yet those with the power to influence their future opted for lifestyle improvements in the here and now. This limited focus was powerfully reinforced by the materialistic values of the global market place with its legions of advertisers, merchandizers and PR men, to our collective cost. But two other kinds of interest in the future were also evident. One was based on prudence: the desire to avoid future disasters. Notwithstanding the failure of the 'millennium bug' to exert feared disastrous effects, the need for prudence was supported by the experience of social, technical and environmental disasters as well as by a flourishing dystopian literature that played out in movies, computer games and other media. The other interest was, and continues to be, driven by aspiration: the desire to create a better world through positive achievements. Both kinds of interest created a very wide range of futures-related activity, some of which, over time, became incorporated into the futures field.

During the 1960s and 1970s a number of futures-related courses were established in universities and schools. The study of the future had arrived. Some remained content to work within the existing knowledge base. Others focused more on applying futures knowledge, foresight, to practical ends. In practice this tended to mean placing futures expertise in the hands of business and industry where, as noted, it joined with existing interests in strategic planning and marketing. By the mid-1990s a coherent and internationally grounded knowledge base for FS had emerged.¹ A new field had been born.

But, since it was indeed new, it had to travel the same path of legitimation that all new fields must tread. So it was that the insights and practices of FS surged a long way ahead of implementation. The conceptual base of FS, the tools and methods, the globe spanning networks had all been created and proven, but the field itself still remained largely unknown and under-utilized.

Having come so far in approximately half a century, how can the field of FS and foresight studies move on in the 21st? How can its rich store of intellectual and

¹ Also see CD-ROM incorporating vol. 4, Inayatullah S, editor, Foresight International, 2000 [1].

practical knowledge be more widely used? I take up such questions below. But first I want to sketch in some aspects of the ‘civilizational challenge’.

2. Denial and the ‘civilizational challenge’

One way to illustrate the potential of knowledge—high quality interpretations—about the future is to consider familiar, concrete, situations. How does it feel to know that your job is finishing, or that you will have to attend court on a certain date? How does it feel to be told that you, or someone close to you, has but a few months to live? Such ‘foreknowns’, messages from the future, exert powerful effects and they tend to dominate one’s life thereafter. Anyone who doubts the potential impacts of such ‘foreknowledge’ need only reflect on their own experience in such situations. But if we shift the time scale to, say 30 years, and change the focus to humankind as a whole, a different phenomenon can be seen: denial on a very wide scale.

The ‘civilizational challenge’ is a complex subject so I will only mention a few aspects of it here.

2.1. *The industrial ‘flatland’*

During several centuries of industrialism the sheer success of instrumental reason for many years eclipsed other ‘ways of knowing’ such that the outer world of empirical reality seemed to be the primary, or indeed the only one. A globe-spanning infrastructure developed but instrumental reason could neither recognize nor address the spiritual poverty felt by nearly everyone, rich or poor. Wilber coined the term ‘flatland’ to describe the way that, in the standard view of science, a world with a vital vertical dimension embracing heights and depths, was reduced to a flattened travesty of itself [2]. Within that ‘thin’ and diminished domain were all the comforts and diversions of material life, but meaning was nowhere to be found. It was only by acts of epistemological recovery, of starting from different assumptions, employing different practices and actively integrating the inner world with the outer one, that the flatland could be rejected and replaced by a richer, deeper, more resonant and a humanly-vital integral view. The latter re-establishes the vertical dimension, brings meaning, purpose and direction back into human view. So it is with some alarm that we realize that most organizations, most texts and practices that apply in business, governance and education (for example) still operate very much out of a diminished flatland view. Thus, as the 21st century gets under way, earlier views remain very much alive and continue to support a range of pathologies. Among them is denial.

2.2. *The ideology of economic growth*

It is fascinating to observe how various speech communities handle the notion of growth. I will briefly mention three. From what I can see most, if not all, the world’s political players still hold fast to the view that ‘growth is good’. They are supported

in this view by conventional economists. But if one looks across a deep cultural divide to the speech communities involved in studying and tracking global environmental change, a very different picture emerges. Here there is a widespread awareness of the sheer unsustainability of present practices and of the 'growthist' view that supports them. Growth of the old, industrial, material kind is clearly becoming increasingly costly and dangerous and many alternatives to present growth-addicted practices have been explored [3]. Some are under active development. But few have been widely applied. Finally, if one shifts focus again and looks at the powerful, sophisticated and energetic groups of innovators and 'netizens' that are now clustering furiously around the rapidly-expanding internet, one sees some evidence of a shift to non-material growth and the rise of symbolically-based industries. Is this a shift in the 'right' direction? Not necessarily. Advances in technology without corresponding advances in moral/ethical capacity only exacerbate the current dysfunctional imbalances in our culture. This uncomfortable fact is overlooked by the 'netizen' community which tends, on the whole, toward libertarianism and moral relativism. (I will return to this issue below.) But one thing is clear: growth-based economics remain dominant and no competing paradigm (complete with its own very different institutional patterns and practices) has yet become mainstream.

2.3. Impacts on the global system

In the pre-industrial period it was probably true to say that humanity was, at that time, surrounded by, and largely felt itself to be surrounded by, the 'vast and inexhaustible' world of nature. Over the last three centuries that pivotal reality has been inverted. Nature is now surrounded and, in many places, overwhelmed by humanity. The impacts on the global system have been observed, recorded, written about, televised, etc. for some decades now. But human beings have many ways of blocking out reality and it is true to say, I think, that very few people actually try to begin to connect the detailed reality and texture of their lives with our collective impacts upon the world. Some small victories have been won and in some limited areas the tide of devastation has been slowed or even halted. But, overall, the rich players in the rapidly globalizing world economy continue to live 'as if there was no tomorrow'. It is therefore not surprising that the poor tend to follow their example if, and when, they can.

2.4. Futures overwhelmed by technology

Some years ago a popular Hollywood film called 'Terminator Two' portrayed a future in which humanity had lost its battle with the machines. The film was an outstanding example of the genre of dystopian futures that has steadily grown over recent decades. The evident popularity of the genre may indicate a displaced awareness that the real historical future is, in some way, similarly threatened. One can go to a cinema and share one's fears with others in a fictional context, experience some sort of catharsis, and then re-emerge into the world with the level of existential tension temporarily reduced. But, as ever, reality creeps up on what where once

outlandish speculations. A large number of cultural productions have explored our likely futures when instrumental reason, driven by human instincts such as greed, power, profit, etc., keeps on spinning out precursors of dystopia in the real world. More recently Bill Joy, chief scientist at Sun Microsystems, and by no means an ‘anti-progress’ luddite, speculated openly about where the technologies of the early 21st century were likely to take us: biotechnology, nanotechnology and IT (or what he calls ‘robotics’) [4]. He didn’t like what he saw: a dehumanized, machine-dominated, out-of-control future. A short time later a new computer virus (dubbed the ‘love bug’) devastated computer systems around the world, causing some \$20 billion worth of damage. Far from being an unalloyed ‘good’ the internet can be seen as a new kind of ecology with its own distinctive predators and diseases. Instability may be inherent in it as designer viruses multiply in the silicon world. As ever, new powers bring new costs and dependencies in their wake.

Unfortunately there is an indissoluble relationship between foresight and experience. We, our organizations, and civilization require the latter, it seems, before the former will be seriously engaged. This means that we, and more particularly, our children, will have an interesting ride over the next 30 or years or so, at least. A dehumanized world overrun by machines we can neither see nor control has become a distinct possibility. But, as a heretic calling the bluff of ever-advancing technological utopias, Joy was pilloried by his peers. We still do not clearly read the signs that point to the dangerous world that the powerful are continuing to construct around us in pursuit of short-term gain. Technological narcissism remains a largely unquestioned force within the late industrial context.

2.5. Short term thinking

I regard short-term thinking as one of the most dangerous perceptual defects that we have inherited from the recent past. It is not a culturally necessary attribute. Many earlier cultures, and even some present ones, take a longer view as a default norm. But Western civilization (and those that follow in its path) has adopted a curiously contradictory stance. On the one hand: transform the world beyond measure; on the other: don’t stop consider the consequences. Don’t build the institutions that Bob Jungk and others suggested would adopt a look-out (foresight) role. Don’t help governments, businesses, schools and the rest to develop high-quality forward views. Don’t see foresight as a structural necessity. And don’t take the field of FS seriously.

If this were not the actual history we are living through it could be dismissed as a perverse work of fiction. But, unfortunately, the ‘civilizational challenge’ does exist. It can plainly be seen intersecting in a thousand ways with the broad symbolic arena that is FS. But, overall, very few people are paying attention. Not long ago I looked in vain through a large American-owned book store in Melbourne for anything, a single shelf, representing the FS category. But what I actually found was a long trail of several hundred people queuing up to have a book of glossy pictures signed by a popular singer.... Who was it that said ‘man cannot bear much reality’?

What strategies might FS undertake to deal with this historically unprecedented situation?

3. Strategies for futures studies

3.1. *Establishing shared meta-goals*

A meta-goal is a broad, overarching, goal that serves to focus much otherwise fragmented effort and to bring different initiatives into alignment. Here I consider three meta-goals that could be considered for adoption by the international FS community.

3.1.1. *The de-colonizing of futures knowledge*

Most of the early development of the Futures Field occurred in Europe and North America. But the early expressions of futures awareness showed a very limited understanding of how socially situated this and all forms of knowledge are. As noted, methods from the field have been applied most consistently (though in a fragmented and partial fashion) in business environments. It may be inevitable that much high quality work is proprietary in nature and not widely shared. But, more importantly, corporate work needs to be complemented by work motivated by a real concern for the long-term well being of humanity. The present imbalance should be corrected because human interests in the future are universal.

As Habermas, among others, have clearly shown, all people have interests in self-understanding, self-constitution and self-realization. Futures work therefore needs to be carried out more broadly and much more consistently in the public interest. At present only a few Institutions of Foresight (IOFs) actually do this. And while the value of their work should not be under-estimated, IOFs are only haphazardly located around the world. There are huge gaps. It should be the goal of all public administrations to incorporate the best of futures thinking, foresight capability, into their routine operations. An effective way to de-colonize FS is to ensure that it emerges into common practice around the world. To this end, the centres of futures activity (IOFs, research institutes, NGOs, universities) should make conscious efforts to show public administrations how to initiate this work and apply it fruitfully. We should not wait passively for the latter to take on new functions since this could take forever; rather, every effort should be made to bring the necessary expertise into these laggard contexts and to demonstrate the utility of foresight in each specific case.

In less well-endowed environments it will be necessary to donate futures expertise over a sustained period until the local skill base can become self-sustaining. Moreover, every attempt should be made to continue to build up non-Western approaches to futures capability and understanding. If this occurs consistently then futures expertise will be effectively decolonized and will become universal. The key here may be what Inayatullah calls the ‘dialogue of civilizations’. This refers to a process of ‘articulating the resources within each tradition for mutual goals (such as) tolerance, transcendence, the good society, etc.’. He adds, ‘we have to find a way to

show that images of the future, or future generations consciousness, are central to the planet's shared memory and (its) shared possible future' [5].

3.1.2. *Community access to foresight*

At present most foresight work takes place in remote locations where it is hidden away in the recesses of large organizations. It needs to be freed from these limitations and rendered into forms that make it accessible and usable to the general public and to communities. For example, high street shop fronts could be converted into community futures resource centres. Here inexpensive booklets and paperbacks could be sold. Futures-related videos and DVDs could be hired. Consultations with experts in a variety of futures-related fields could be organized, either in person or remotely.

Futures practitioners should be eager to venture out beyond their comfort zones and willing to engage the public whenever, and wherever, the public may be found. Viable models from other fields include the legal services that are sometimes established in poor urban areas and the more well-known medical specialists *Medicine Sans Frontiers*. This suggests the need to develop a whole new cadre of 'community futurists' who would take on a range of community-related tasks. For example they could: hold community visioning workshops, provide simple planning assistance, facilitate discussions between local groups and remote specialists, and liaise between community groups, local government, national and international entities.

3.1.3. *Design of foresight cultures*

A foresight culture is an organization or society whose view of the world is imbued with futures awareness. Every action, every decision, every strategy that is adopted is done so in the light of a carefully constructed forward view. It is a culture in which the present is consciously mediated from a clear understanding both of the past and a range of possible futures. Much effort has been devoted to creating the capacity within individuals, groups and organizations of all kinds to engage in this kind of 'big picture', 'long term' thinking. The latter pays off in a thousand different ways as the implications of subtle signals emerging from high-quality forward views permeate decision making and the conduct of everyday affairs.

Foresight cultures may be started by taking up the tools of futures enquiry, embedding them within their knowledge base and communicating them via the international futures discourse. They can begin at any place and at any time. Eventually the foresight cultures of organizations can be expected to stimulate the development of society-wide futures awareness. This will be a huge step forward in social evolution since never before have whole societies developed and applied this awareness. It takes us well beyond the traps and diversions of the rational ego toward the stage that Wilber calls 'vision logic' which is a globally aware, networked and highly inclusive state of being [2].

3.2. *Raising the profile of professional standards in futures work*

For any field to be taken seriously it must adopt minimum professional standards. This means dealing effectively with some challenging issues. For example, what, or

who, is a futurist? Is it someone who just uses the name? Or is it someone who has, in some way, demonstrated high-quality involvement with the field over a period of time? Of equal concern is the question of how one becomes a futurist. Is it by joining a futures organization? By taking one or more courses? By mastering a technique? By studying the futures literature? By writing papers and/or books? Such questions need to be resolved.

In a discussion paper on professional standards, I reviewed past work by Yehezkel Dror, Roy Amara and others [6]. Essentially, Dror stressed the necessary features of a demanding intellectual and practical discipline, e.g. clarity about the foundations of FS, the ability to engage in what he calls ‘thinking in history’, making explicit assumptions about human nature and values, taking a broad view of the future, the use of critical imagination and working in a mode he calls ‘sophisticated uncertainty’. Amara’s guidelines are simpler and more practical. He called for conceptual explicitness, analytical clarity and for the products of futures work to be clearly useful. I added that futurists should: be aware of the assumptions embedded in their own cultural traditions, locate their work at one or more of the four levels, and attempt to integrate ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ methods. I advanced two further propositions. First, that FS was an expression of shared transpersonal interests to create a better world. Second, that the ultimate purpose of FS was to open out productive mind spaces, precursors of social innovations, from which more advanced stages of civilized life can emerge.

I summarized the work of a number of people who, over the years, had raised the question of professional ethics. The most significant contribution was Wendell Bell’s 1993 proposal for a professional code. Bell’s criteria are too extensive to summarize here. Overall, he attempted to define ‘proper behaviour’ and to set out an hierarchy of obligations that futurists owe to society at large. He then proposed that the WFS and the WFSF cooperate to implement a specific code, complete with sanctions for violations and awards for high quality work [7].

I then attempted to clarify and extend the discussion by posing some key practical questions. For example: what should professional futurists know? What qualifications are needed? How is good work distinguished from bad? Some provisional answers to these questions are given in this paper.

3.3. A quantum jump in the active use of FS in educational contexts

One of the main areas where FS has already demonstrated a potential that is a very long way beyond present levels of implementation is within education. Here, an extensive, but simple, set of concepts and tools provide the symbolic and practical foundations for the development of futures understanding and capability. Futures approaches have been tried and tested at every educational level from early childhood to advanced tertiary studies and corporate environments [8]. But within school systems there is a key systemic constraint that has, so far, prevented futures in education from developing to anything like its full potential.

The blockage is not primarily in schools. Children and young people actively enjoy and thrive upon futures material. When they are given sufficient time (to familiarize

themselves with new material) and continuing support, teachers find futures approaches congenial and professionally rewarding. Perceptive school principals encourage futures-related work at every opportunity with demonstrable results. But the issue is this. Educational systems and bureaucracies, both public and private, are not focused merely on education. The determining forces within them are more directly concerned with the imposition of such industrial era imperatives as efficiency, effectiveness and control. Hence they are primarily governed and driven not, as one might think, by educational concerns but by two powerful and largely unquestioned forces that have no real interest in education and none whatever in 'the future' (which in these contexts remains a residual category of no real significance). These two sets of forces are politics and economics [9]. The proof of this particular pudding is the near-complete absence of books, journals and papers produced by practicing educators about substantive economic and political matters. The actual practice of education has become squeezed into a tiny operational box over which these oppressive administrative structures stand. This helps to explain much of the stress and frustration experienced by those working in schools. They have almost no power and they know it.

I have long struggled with this dilemma and cannot, by any means, claim to have resolved it. But I have reached a view on it which, briefly, is as follows. It is now time to challenge the educational bureaucracies on their own ground and to charge them with failing to fulfil their public responsibility—which I take to be that of preparing young people to become active citizens of the 21st century. I cannot see how that public duty can possibly be fulfilled without incorporating a futures perspective not just into school curricula, initial and in-service training and the preparation of principals, but also into the heart of the administrative system itself. In other words, what I'm suggesting is that these systems that are supposed to serve the public interest take it upon themselves to learn from the best work done elsewhere (including corporate work) and to design specific foresight arrangements that will suit the particular needs and circumstances of school systems. That is, they will need to design a suitable approach to environmental scanning. They will need to employ foresight specialists. They will need to develop their own ways of constructing high quality forward views and then networking these, applying these, in practice throughout the entire school system. They will also need to involve schools and teachers in the design and implementation of the new systems and support them in adapting their practices accordingly.

Similarly, the universities are currently undergoing a series of 'shocks' that derive from: changes in funding levels from central governments, the challenge of the internet and a range of highly competitive threats to their core business from commercial providers of educational services. But, if they reconceived themselves as IOFs they would soon see that the current situation presents themselves with quite new opportunities. Many options for the futures of universities go well beyond the terms of the current debate about finance and long-distance teaching and learning [10].

As education at every level begins to adapt and reconfigure existing futures expertise and capability to its own, specific, requirements, then the 'flood gates will open' insofar as the widespread take up of futures thinking, futures approaches, are con-

cerned. It will mean, for example, that most people will have some of the starting points for futures understanding and enquiry. It is by no means necessary for everyone to become a futurist. But when nearly everyone understands what high-quality futures work can deliver (in terms of functional human and organizational capacity) then they will undoubtedly support some of the wider institutional and organizational shifts that are now needed.

3.4. *The further evolution of the knowledge base of FS*

As noted above, the knowledge base of FS (KBFS) was progressively assembled through the late-1990s and provided an increasingly coherent and secure foundation for disciplinary activities such as research, teaching and the induction of students and/or new practitioners into the field. However this ‘foundation’ of theoretical and applied knowledge was not conceived of as a permanent, unchanging, entity. It was not, and is not, a monolithic foundation. Rather, it is *an evolving process*. Elements of the field would be reinterpreted or become redundant through acts of critique and quality control. New types of synthesis would occur. New voices would enter the futures conversation and alter the discourse, create new methods, etc. Overall, the KBFS was seen as something that would evolve over time in different contexts and in different ways. How can this process of evolution be assisted?

Critique should be seen both as an essential futures method and as part of its own internal provision for quality control. Indeed, critical futures studies (as I have defined them) do not embody a need to criticize. Rather such studies seek to understand social phenomena in more depth. Greater depth can certainly be challenging at first but, by the same token, it also conveys a greater power to think freshly about the constitution and re-constitution of the social order. This, really, is what FS is all about. It is an attempt to re-think, re-feel, and re-vision the foundations of social life so that they may be reconstituted on a more secure, more sustainable and more highly developed basis. *Thus, at its best, FS has more to do with distinguishing the outlines of more advanced stages of social life than it does with conveying special advantage upon those who currently seek some competitive advantage from using elements of the field for their own limited purposes.*

As the field advances, as its arena of authoritative reference expands, so it will progressively uncover new principles, new subject matters, and stimulate the development of new methodologies. Some of the latter will support new modes of synthesis, perhaps through accounts of macrohistory or sweeping new metaperspectives and grand narratives of innovation and recovery. Some methodologies will spring from earlier foundations. Some will emerge from syncretic and multicultural perspectives. The layered futures methodologies, in particular, seem to hold particular promise in all of these regards [11]. They take us well beyond the earlier limitations of empirically founded work and begin to capture some of the rich possibilities for in-depth conceptualization of the human predicament.

Some of the most promising sources of new insight and understanding within futures work lie in the emergence of new voices: the authentic new voices of those from a range of non-Western cultures who are able to see things freshly from view-

points that are informed by other assumptions and epistemologies. For example, Zia Sardar has written extensively about futures in the context of Islamic civilization [12,13]. Again, from beyond the current ‘cultural mainstream’, shamanic ‘ways of knowing’ will routinely disrupt highly structured patterns of knowledge and overturn existing power relations [14]. Another challenge may be the development of forms of consciousness from beyond the present human community altogether. Some believe that they could come as the result of SETI: the search for extraterrestrial intelligence; others that they could come from successful attempts to create artificial life here on earth. But, while many stories of SF have attempted to domesticate the rise of artificial intelligence, I think it unlikely. AI as currently conceived is another example of reductionist science and technology with aspirations far beyond their capacity.

Finally a more positive and powerfully transforming possibility should be considered. What if the most potent sources of inspiration were to arise from a sustained engagement with humanity’s ‘higher self’? What if the deep wells of spiritual insight and transpersonal realisation were available to energise the transition beyond industrialism? Our collective prospects would certainly be transformed. This, in my view, is the most promising path toward a livable future. Wilber’s outline of an Integral Vision (i.e. of a society re-shaped by advanced spiritual awareness and capacity) is one of the clearest expressions of this impulse. It is being rendered into practice by the establishment of the Integral Institute in Boulder, Colorado [15]. Professional futurists should take such visions very seriously indeed and fashion their own, carefully considered, responses to them.

One thing is certain: as the 21st century proceeds, so the KBFS will evolve in ways that will remain essentially unpredictable to the early pioneers.

3.5. The design, implementation and nurturing of institutions of foresight

Institutions of Foresight (IOFs) are one of the most significant innovations to have emerged in the late 20th century. They arose in different parts of the world not as a result of some kind of blueprint or master plan. Rather, they arose because many different individuals and groups, in many different places, independently responded to the macrohistorical forces mentioned above. They incorporated an understanding that ‘the future’ was no longer an ‘empty space’ toward which one could maintain a passive attitude. Rather, they saw that it was a field of potentials containing good and evil, desirable futures and terminally disastrous ones. Hence the new attitude toward the future was active.

IOFs sprang up in many places, but the first generation was limited by lack of knowledge, lack of resources, poorly trained personnel and other defects. By the early 21st century this had changed. The beginnings of a knowledge base for IOFs had started to take shape. This knowledge base was mainly practical, rather than theoretical. It was founded on an understanding of what had worked and what had not worked in numerous IOFs around the world. Hence, a growing number of principles for the successful operation of IOFs began to emerge. This meant that new IOFs did not need to repeat the mistakes of their predecessors. They could begin

from a higher position on the learning curve and move more quickly along their trajectory toward successful functioning [16].

So as the early 21st century progresses, it is vital that designs for the successful operation of IOFs become widely available to anyone wishing to work in this evolving arena. Beyond this, communication networks are needed to link together all serious IOFs in a conscious international community. In this way, lessons, resources, principles of understanding and operation can be more easily shared and developed. The days of IOFs operating in isolation should, by now, be over. If economies can be ‘globalized’ for private profit why not the innovative work of far-sighted IOFs for the well-being of humankind?

3.6. The elaboration of futures themes in mass media

It is common knowledge that, in an informal sense, futures themes have proliferated in mass media during recent decades. But, as noted, there are problems with much of this material. First, it tends to be impressionistic, and hence used mainly for diversionary purposes such as advertizing, entertainment and dramatic surface effects. Second, it in no way refers back to, or embodies the real capabilities of, the futures field. There are many, many options for the useful elaboration of futures themes in mass media. I will touch briefly on just three of them here.

3.6.1. Evoking the ‘state of the planet’

The World Watch Institute has, for some years, annually published two series of well-researched and highly informative books under the general headings of *The State of the World* and *Vital Signs*. Both of these are highly textual in their present forms. But with the careful application of modern graphics packages, their essential messages could be readily reinterpreted for mass audiences. For example, information on changes in temperature, humidity, soil loss, water supply, deforestation, urbanisation, pollution, ocean currents, weather patterns, etc. could be introduced into existing games packages such that players could see and understand the dynamics of such ‘vital signs.’ Games such as *Civilization* can be adapted to integrate such real world data, providing a way of considering the long-term pathways toward sustainability.

3.6.2. Dramatizing scenarios

Scenario building is perhaps a ‘keystone’ methodology of FS. It can model plausible futures that have been structured to reflect features of organizations and social systems, including a number of the key uncertainties that they face. But, again, most scenarios are represented in textual form, supplemented by diagrams and static graphics. How much different would some of these plausible ‘future worlds’ become if they were inhabited by believable characters capable of meaningful speech and action? The careful scripting and ‘fleshing out’ of scenarios would make them much more accessible and humanly meaningful. Rendered thus, they could be used on TV and in schools. They could supplement news reports. And they could develop into

a new kind of hybrid art form—one that was based on science and sophisticated technology, but rounded out with a range of characters and human faces.

3.6.3. *Panoramic futures*

The advent of post-modernism and the premature reports of the so-called ‘death’ of convincing metanarratives (or grand stories) had served to undermine the possibility of seeing the present as more than a series of fractured splinters of human perception and experience. But the critique of post modernity and the recovery of the capacity for grand narratives brings with them the possibility of recovering panoramic accounts of futures. The archetype of such accounts is, perhaps, the far future novels of Olaf Stapledon. He was followed by a number of other similarly ambitious SF writers, some of whom constructed credible future histories. All are fertile grounds for inspiring a non-fictional treatment of panoramic futures.

There are other relevant models. For example, Kenneth Clarke’s BBC TV series, *Civilization*, and Joseph Bronowski’s *Ascent of Man*. The opening up of the futures domain and the elaboration of its methods and discourse makes it possible for us to imagine similarly panoramic treatments set largely in future time. Again, the texts already exist. It just requires someone to go through them, construct a plausible outline, then set to work to fill in the details. Given the resources of a major TV network such a project should be of sufficient technical quality to give its subject an entirely new profile and sense of verisimilitude. The Long Now Foundation is one of a very few organizations to concentrate on panoramic futures and its *Clock of the Long Now* is a striking example of what can be achieved in this arena when capable minds focus their attention upon it [17].

3.7. *The active involvement of more individuals, groups and organisations in the futures conversation*

This, really, follows from all the above. If FS and applied foresight work were being carried out according to clear meta goals; if professional standards were being applied to each and every futures publication, project and piece of research; if FS was being widely applied in educational contexts; if the KBFS was continuing to evolve in the ways suggested here; if IOFs were flourishing in an effective worldwide network; and if futures themes were being elaborated in the mass media, then: many more people would not only know about the futures conversation, they would feel empowered to join in and take an active part in it.

Hence the measures suggested here should not be seen in isolation. Rather, they should be seen as different aspects of a broad set of strategies to bring FS from the background to the foreground. This is both do-able as well as worth doing. For surely its time has come.

4. **Conclusion: the choice facing humankind**

FS did not emerge, grow and develop for merely individual or group reasons, however powerful the self-interest of various groups may have been, then or now.

It appeared on the scene because humanity had passed a number of critical thresholds in its belief systems, its preferred modes of knowledge, the outworking of these upon the world and the consequent rise of the global problematique in all its many guises. The future became an artefact, a consequence of humanity's own will, a test of its depth of understanding and, finally, of its maturity. Hence, for this writer, the essence of 'civilizational challenge' is very simple: wake up or die.

As noted above, it seems to me that the dominant trends in the world lead directly and unambiguously to an unstable future characterized by global inequity, a rapidly deteriorating environment and the short-sighted, too-rapid unleashing of a series of technological revolutions that humanity manifestly lacks the wisdom or means to mediate or control. For example, and in contrast with many currently fashionable views, it makes no sense to me to contemplate building space colonies, mining the asteroids or terraforming Mars until such time as a level of consciousness can be widely attained that is commensurate with the technical powers involved. As ever, balance is the key. In this view it is vital for a radically unbalanced civilization such as ours to reign in its present compulsive technological dynamism until it can be mediated by a sufficiently advanced capacity for wisdom. But of course prudence, foresight, compassionate awareness are not the dominant forms of motivation now operating on planet Earth, and this fact casts a dark shadow across our collective future.

What futures lie behind the all-too-possible breakdown scenarios? In my view the path beyond the 'civilizational challenge' is clear. The central task for the futures community is to begin to turn its individual and collective attention away from helping to maintain the obsolete patterns and structures of the industrial era and toward the task of envisioning and designing the structural underpinnings of the next level of human civilization. While there are certainly huge limits upon our knowledge, and while humility is an ever-present necessity, we are far from helpless. We hold the future in our hands.

We could begin from the 'ground' up, as it were; that is, from acts of epistemological recovery such as adopting a long-term view of the present, implementing foresight widely, moving beyond ego and transcending the reductionist flatland in all its many guises. These lead us out of industrial era traps and toward a culture that, perhaps, takes wisdom—ancient, modern and post-modern—as its core quality, capability and goal. In order to pursue this path we will seek to elevate our own consciousness beyond that considered normal during the industrial period by whatever discipline or spiritual practice that we find useful. We will create frameworks, mind spaces, social innovations, designs of every kind that give expression to the highest human motives that we are capable of: caring, compassion, loving kindness and long-term stewardship, much as the Buddhists have always taught. As this occurs on a widening scale I do not doubt that we can, as a collection of interconnected, globe-spanning societies riding this small earth together, find it well within our capacity reform the global economic system, repair the earth's life support structures and create stable, fair, societies. Only when these tasks are well under way should we pursue ever more sophisticated technologies and the move into space.

Let us be clear about this. FS is one strategy that humanity has developed to

energize a vast range of projects and innovative modes of work. It corresponds to a potential expansion of consciousness on a very wide scale. So FS must certainly continue to be applied in academic and applied contexts. These are vital steps in its development and its progress through the necessary process of social and professional legitimization. But there are a thousand paths to the top of the mountain and FS is by no means the only way forward.

At heart, FS is a creation of history. Its role is that of handmaiden to history. Without a sturdy, well-founded and spiritually energized discipline such as FS can now become, a new dark age seems that much more likely. But if, on the other hand, some of the suggestions outlined here resonate strongly in other minds and spirits, then the precursors of more advanced stages of civilized life can be defined, grasped and enacted. They can move steadily into history.

That is the promise of FS as a civilizational catalyst. That is what we are working towards.

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