

Guest editorial

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The notion that the state of play in the futures field (SoPiFF) was a topic worth considering emerged from a conversation with Sesh Velamoor, Director of the Seattle-based Foundation for the Future (FFF), at a 2006 conference at Tamkang University in Taiwan. The Foundation itself was established by philanthropist Walter Kistler and charged to support disciplined work regarding prospects for humanity's long-term future. It was Kistler who observed that "humanity is like a vehicle going down a steep slope without a steering wheel, without brakes, and without a driver" (Kistler, 2006). The Foundation later sponsored the initial phase of the project. Another starting point appeared in the form of a paper published in the *Wilson Quarterly* (Rejeski and Olson, 2006). It posed the question "has futurism failed?" and suggested, among other things that, in the US at least, futures-related activities had perhaps peaked as early as 1980. This conclusion seemed worth investigating further.

Not long beforehand, members of the Australian Foresight Institute had collaborated on a number of innovations in foresight frameworks and methods, including those that applied to scanning methodology (Slaughter, 1999). Some of the latter were later brought together under the general heading of "metascanning" which, in turn, was applied to various topics such as foresight practice in Australia and a report by the US National Intelligence Council (Ramos, 2004; Slaughter, 2005). The SoPiFF project then became a further "test bed" for the method, and a team of five researchers in three countries was assembled for the purpose. The contributions to this special issue are among the outcomes.

Four of the papers here provide overviews of the methods, results and implications of the project. Slaughter reviews the purposes of the project, the methodology used and some of the results. Slaughter and Riedy then consider the extent to which the "futures field" may have had a role, or several, in understanding and resolving the "global problematique." Riedy next evaluates the evidence in relation to one specific issue – the influence of futures work on public policy and sustainability. May presents an overview of the scanning work he carried out on foresight in Europe. This region benefits from the support of a number of organizations, including the EEC itself, and offers numerous case studies. Finally, Morgan picks up a theme that emerged during the project that led to a view of what he refers to as "futures schools of thought." He is currently working on "part two" of this new mini-project.

As the papers make clear, it is essential to regard the results as indicative only, not authoritative. Given limitations of funding, personnel and time, to say nothing of the hazards of applying a new and relatively untested method, further iterations are essential. They will benefit from the "baseline" work reported here, from the helpful and necessary critiques that have been, and will be, received as well as from a

wider spread of subsequent researchers. It will also be essential to find ways to broaden out the scope of the work by accessing material in languages other than English.

One of the features of the project is a web site created by Maree Conway, one of the original researchers, to whom we owe a particular debt of thanks for her coordination work and for managing the site[1]. Interested readers can find the original scanning items there along with further information about methods and results. Chris Riedy, co-editor of this special issue is happy to receive any feedback on the items there and/or suggestions for subsequent work[2].

Finally, it is useful to briefly indicate where this first round of SoPiFF has taken us in relation to the concerns expressed at the outset. Some reviewers of the draft papers correctly pointed out that the terms “futures field” and “global problematique” evoked questions of their own – is there such a “field” and is the “problematique” a dated notion? The editors and authors recognize that such terms hide a good deal of complexity and dissonance and yet they remain in wide use[3]. The debates continue. Meanwhile we have at least made a start on attempting an international review of this diverse and extended area of “futures/foresight” work. Subsequent iterations will clearly need to review both conceptual and methodological issues.

Still, the results of the project provide an early assessment of “what is going on.” It shows that a range of futures concepts and methods are in wide use around the world. The “field” provides access to improved tools and methods, more extensive frameworks, deeper understanding through a rich literature and a broad array of practitioners working in very many organizations. That must count as a “success” of sorts. The nagging suspicion that emerges, however, is that as yet the futures/foresight area has simply not progressed far enough, fast enough or been adopted broadly enough. Moreover, what the project does make clear is that its main applications appear to be in mainstream contexts that are almost inevitably culturally conservative and thus tend not to deal directly or well with the kind of “big issue” concerns that collectively stand before us[4]. The more progressive, reformative and radical elements of futures/foresight work thus far do not appear to have thrived in a market-dominated global environment though this could change. Similarly, universities and school systems have, on the whole, continued to ignore the area and its range of valuable offerings.

At the end of the day, the “futures field” confronts the same imponderables of human nature that confront all such attempts at progressive adaptation and change. Technical innovation rips ahead, being confined only by imagination, funding and the laws of physics. Human and cultural innovations / adaptations are each of a very different order. Change here is slow, problematic and beset by all-too-common disappointments and reversals. The fact that more advanced futures methods now incorporate a detailed recognition of the “shaping interiors” must be counted as a significant step forward. But, as with the putative “global problematique,” we found that an ability to “understand” does not mean that embedded concerns such as these can be readily resolved. So perhaps it is best left to the reader to decide if, in the end, Rejeski and Olson were right. Does the high point of futures work indeed lie in the past, or does the material presented here provide a salutary but perhaps potentially more enabling view upon which to build?

Notes

1. The SoPiFF web site is at: www.thinkingfutures.net/sopiff The data were compiled by Maree Conway, an AFI graduate, who also runs the site.
2. Chris Riedy can be contacted at: criedy@uts.edu.au
3. A Global Problematique Education Network is at: http://portal.unesco.org/es/ev.php-URL_ID=3288&URL_DO=DO_PRINTPAGE&URL_SECTION=201.html
4. Specifically the “overshoot and collapse” trajectory that humanity appears to now be set upon comprised of: peak oil, global warming, regional environmental collapse, species extinctions, mass migrations and the like. See Dyer (2008).

References

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About the guest editor

Richard Slaughter is a writer, practitioner and innovator in futures studies and applied foresight. 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. He is currently Director of Foresight International, an independent company dedicated to building the futures field and facilitating the emergence of social foresight. Richard Slaughter can be contacted at: rsllaughter@ozemail.com.au

Dr Chris Riedy is a Research Director at the Institute for Sustainable Futures with more than 13 years' experience as a researcher, consultant and author on sustainability policy. Chris has particular expertise in climate change response, social change initiatives and applications of Integral theory. He completed doctoral research on Australia's response to climate change in 2005. His thesis was one of the first to apply an Integral futures framework to sustainable development and climate change response. His current work seeks to facilitate a more effective social and political response to climate change. Chris can be contacted at criedy@uts.edu.au

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