

Critical Review of Futures Journals*

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Future Times

Future Times (FT) is published quarterly by the New Zealand Futures Trust (NZFT). The latter is a not-for-profit NGO established in 1982 following the closing of the New Zealand Commission for the Future by the then National (conservative) government. There are normally between 12 and 16 pages. Future Times has been published for at least a decade. The editorial board of the magazine is comprised of the NZFT chairperson and seven other members of this organisation. The policy of the magazine calls for short, to-the-point and accessible articles ranging from less than a page to two or three pages. Most of the authors are members of the NZFT or friends / colleagues from Australia or occasionally further afield. The tone is non-academic, generalist and reasonable. FT has been described as a 'window' into the forward thinking of the NZFT. It is mainly an issues-based publication, covering topics of general interest within New Zealand. Some articles touch on specific uses of FS methods but not on methods per se.

In 2006 publication of the hard copy version ceased and was replaced by an on-line version. Each issue contains a valuable Futurewatch section that lists abstracts of futures-related material under standard generic headings, including Futures Thinking. There are occasional reports on futures organisations (such as the WFS and the WFSF), conferences and other events. Well-written and generally positive book reviews are also published occasionally. Overall, this is an up-beat (but in no way naïve) publication that attempts to alert New Zealand citizens to the often-overlooked implications of present ways of life, trends, signals of change and so on.

Reading through the last few years' copies suggests very strongly, however, that the agendas and concerns of Future Times, its editors and indeed those of the NZFT are very much minority concerns that continue to be overlooked and marginalised by 'mainstream' society in NZ. Overall this is a creditable attempt to keep such agendas and concerns alive.

MS: 1 e; 2 b; 3 N/A; 4 a b c d; 5 a c d; 6 New Zealand

Journal of Futures Studies

JFS was launched in November 1996 at Tamkang University, Taiwan. Tamkang is a private university situated high above Tamsui about 30 kilometres from Taipei. JFS is a product of what is now the Graduate Institute of Futures Studies, a department set up with the explicit patronage of the founder of the university, Clement Chang.

By 2007 the journal had reached volume 11 after two re-designs of the format. The average page length is around 120-150 pages. JFS is primarily intended to be:

a globally-oriented, trans-disciplinary referred journal. Its mission is to develop high-quality, futures-oriented research and thinking based on the evolving knowledge base of Futures studies.

The editorial board is reasonably widespread and active, being called upon to forward promising work and also to referee prospective papers. Like most other journals, however, the board has little or no input into journal policy, editorial directions or publication statistics. Criteria for publishing papers are as follows:

- Epistemologically focused futures studies on the construction of possible, probable and preferable futures.
- Methodologies in futures studies, including not only integrated, layered and critical approaches, but empirical, interpretive or action-based approaches as well.
- Applied Futures (eg, case studies in the use of futures thinking for organisational transformation).
- Alternative futures or particular subjects (eg, genetics, nano-technology, particular areas, such as South East Asia).

While the journal includes occasional material by conventional ‘hard edged’ and ‘empirical’ writers such as G Molitor and W Halal in pursuit of balance, it is overwhelmingly a ‘soft’, culturally and even spiritually-oriented publication, heavily influenced by the worldview of its main co-editor, Sohail Inayatullah, a number of his similarly-oriented colleagues and students (including his wife, Ivana Milojevic). Hence there is a tangible ‘community feel’ about the journal. Articles about causal layered analysis (CLA) or the uses of this method are common. A weakness of the journal is that it tends to veer overly toward abstract, theoretical and philosophical speculations. It contains many *ideas about futures* from different viewpoints but fewer dealing with practical ‘real world’ implementation.

Editorial standards of JFS have risen steadily but remain modest in comparison with more ‘professional’ / commercial journals. Some articles would not be published anywhere else. Yet this also means that graduate students and other new writers have a good chance of being published here. So JFS plays a valuable role in that respect. Without it the pathway to other journals and to book publishing would be that much more difficult. Here, in this relatively open environment, beginning writers can gain experience and also have the satisfaction of being published alongside more accomplished writers in the field.

In short this is a young journal serving the ‘soft’ pole of FS in two main ways:

- it provides a place for beginning writers to gain experience and exposure; and
- it represents a range of often under-addressed concerns dealing with, eg, cultures, methods focussing on interiors, spiritual and philosophical questions.

MS: 1 g; 2 b c; 3 c d; 4 b d; 5 a b c; 6 Taiwan (ROC)

Futures Research Quarterly

This and Future Survey are both publications of the World Future Society (WFS) based in Washington DC. FRQ is an academically oriented journal with pretensions to be taken seriously. Publication started in the mid 1980s and by 2007 it had reached volume 23. The editorial board is overwhelmingly US-based with only a handful of members from overseas. It is published four times a year and of modest size – normally less than 100 pages. Several general articles are included, along with ‘special features’ (eg, a conference or scanning report) and perhaps a book review or two. At the time of writing the latest two issues carried a review of a book called ‘Future INC: How Businesses Can Anticipate and Profit From What’s Next’ (which neatly sums up how the WFS views FS in relation to commerce) and a selection of material from Future Survey (see below). Perhaps the best issue in recent times was that following the 9/11 event with several outstanding pieces by a range of innovative futures thinkers. Overall, however, FRQ contains little that's genuinely new, innovative or groundbreaking and much that's obscure, stereotypical or of limited relevance outside the US. Most of the methodology pieces are minor modifications, afterthoughts or elaborations of earlier work. A piece by Andy Hines that applied new methods to environmental scanning was a rare exception. [1] The format and presentation have not changed over more than 20 years and are very dull.

The editorial policy of the journal encompasses the following aims:

- Its primary objective is to ‘assist decision makers to understand better the potential consequences of present and future decisions by developing images of alternative futures’.
- It seeks ‘contributions both from established academic disciplines and from (various) cross-disciplinary fields’.
- It seeks ‘to encourage and facilitate communication among researchers and practitioners in all related fields and from all geographic, social, political and economic sectors (and to) promote public understanding and education in the methods and uses of futures research’.
- It intends to ‘provide a forum for all who are professionally involved with the theory, methodology, practice and use of futures research’.

These are lofty aims but they are seldom met. The breadth of aspiration is commendable but is not supported by a commensurate level of capability, worldview or range of methodological options.

The underlying problem with FRQ is not merely that of individuals but the tradition of futures work with which most of them are associated and which the WFS so clearly reflects - the 'American empirical tradition'. The term applies not simply because it deals

only or predominantly with the familiar external world (technologies, infrastructures, the future of cars) but because it is deaf and blind to, and therefore largely ignorant of, the 'two revolutions' that have swept FS, applied foresight, and are continuing to restructure and transform it / them from within. That is, first, the 'critical' tradition that sought to introduce what might be termed the 'cultural interiors' into futures enquiry and practice, and, secondly, the 'integral' tradition that shines new light on these and the 'individual human interiors'.

For those whose induction into futures work began before these changes occurred (which is to say, the majority) the world is a simpler, more 'sparse' and humanly 'thin', place. The work carried out in this awareness has typical hallmarks and limitations that are readily seen and have been described elsewhere. [2] But FRQ knows little of this. *Paradoxically, therefore, it is resonant of the past, of earlier disciplinary paradigms, not of the present and certainly not the future.* The underlying point is that this tradition had its time in the sun, produced its results, made contributions that indeed helped bring FS to its current stage. These are real achievements and they deserve to be acknowledged and respected. It should also be recognised, however, that the earlier formative tradition has to be 'transcended and included' in a broader, richer and deeper view. *Taken on its own the empirical tradition is dead as the proverbial doornail because it overlooks the very sources of human insight, value and motivation that make futures work (any work) possible in the first place.* Thus FRQ presents as a lifeless and uninspiring carry-over from earlier times that lacks the capacity to deal with complex multi-dimensional issues and problems.

MS: 1 b; 2 a b; 3 a b; 4 a c; 5 a; 6 USA

Future Survey

For nearly three decades this unique publication has provided summaries of published material on FS and many other related topics. Each monthly issue contains 24 pages with 40 or 50 entries, many with brief editorial comments. Pages one and two contain a list of 'highlights' and a 'synthesis' section providing overviews of the contents. Back issues are available to subscribers on a searchable on-line database. This can be useful when researching specific topics. Editorial policy is unstated.

FS is best understood as a 'broad spectrum scanning source' that alerts subscribers to newly published material. Over time the range of subject matter reviewed has broadened but, as Wendell Bell and others have pointed out, the coverage of FS per se has been limited and idiosyncratic. An in-depth critique of Future Survey was published in Futures in 2001. [3] It was prompted by a compilation of abstracts put out under the heading of 'The Super 70'. A close look at this publication was surprisingly revealing and exposed some of the hidden dynamics underlying FS. Careful analysis revealed it as the projection of an individual view of FS that was idiosyncratic, assumed a God-like power of discrimination and yet was in complete denial regarding the cultural and personal 'filters'

that had shaped the whole opus. Executive oversight from the WFS hierarchy was, and remains, non-existent.

Editors of publications overseas who should have known better merely picked up this material and passively reproduced it. The 'FS view of reality' was reproduced around the world and echoed the deeply unfortunate hegemonic power relations that have plagued the world over the last half-century. Furthermore, the critique that was offered, far from sparking a productive debate, merely led to an attempt to pathologise the intervention, followed by a further collapse of critical standards regarding subsequent works.¹

The overall impression of Future Survey is that the title is a misnomer. It is not about the future as such, but about precursors, signals of change, in the here-and-now. It is determinedly rational and full of what might be called 'despatches from flatland'. That is to say it completely overlooks the limits of reason and the possibilities for depth knowledge and understanding in other domains. The poet William Blake warned that 'reason alone leads to despair' and FS certainly tends to confirm that. Year after year the abstracts bear witness to a society stuck in a reality it can neither fully comprehend nor change. Equally, the WFS itself appears as poorly equipped to respond, offer leadership or even bring together meaningful combinations of people or other resources. What it, and the rest of the WFS opus cannot see is that to escape from the self-constructed nightmare of growth, consumerism and overshoot-and-collapse futures requires 'other reasons for being'. But what those reasons may be cannot be found in this context.

It would be a mistake, however, to write off Future Survey. With the right kind of executive oversight, broader and deeper cultural and personal 'filters', a real effort at internationalisation (eg, a network of professional contributors from around the world) and a more open-minded and outward-looking editorial presence, a much more fruitful publication could one day emerge.

MS: 1 b; 2 a b; 3 a b; 4 a c; 5 a b; 6 USA

References

1. A. Hines, Applying integral futures to environmental scanning, *Futures Research Quarterly*, 19, 4 (2003) 49-62.
2. R. Slaughter, *Futures Beyond Dystopia: Creating Social Foresight*, Routledge, London, 2005. Also available on CD-ROM *Towards a Wise Culture*, <http://foresightinternational.com.au>
3. R. Slaughter, The flight of American super-ego, *Futures* 33 (2001) 891-896.

¹ FS was the only source that panned both the KBFS and *Futures Beyond Dystopia*. The editor had difficulty in distinguishing between the integral perspective per se (which is a product of the work of many people) and that of Ken Wilber, the individual from whose work it initially emerged. In Chicago we met with an FS sub-editor who encouraged us to build bridges and find ways to work together, arguing that in essence, 'we were on the same side'. We agreed and put forward some specific suggestions. But that was the last we heard.

Futures: the Journal of Policy, Planning and Futures Studies

The journal Futures is widely regarded as the leader in its field. It is also one of the longest established since, by 2008, it will have been continuously published for forty years. For over half of that time it was published by Butterworths (Oxford, UK) and then later taken over by Elsevier (a publishing behemoth that incorporates many journals and fields of enquiry). The change is not seen by many as a positive one.

A 'light' issue of Futures may only have 60 pages; a double issues may have 240. It is uniquely equipped with a widely distributed and highly qualified board from many countries, a part-time editor and six consulting editors, including one in charge of reviews. It describes itself in the following way:

Futures is an international, refereed, multidisciplinary journal concerned with medium and long-term futures of cultures and societies, science and technology, economics and politics, environment and the planet and individuals and humanity. Covering methods and practices of futures studies, the journal seeks to examine possible and alternative futures of all human endeavours. Futures seeks to promote divergent and pluralistic visions, ideas and opinions about the future.

During its earlier years Futures was published bi-monthly but for the last decade or so it has put out ten issues a year. (The reasons for this shift are unclear, but it is thought that it was sought by the publisher, in part to justify increases in subscription rates.) As many as four issues a year are normally devoted to special topics and guest edited. Regarding content, it is undoubtedly the most substantial and highly regarded journal in the futures arena and is genuinely interdisciplinary. Some of the special issues, in particular, publish highly innovative work found nowhere else. On the other hand some of the 'regular' issues contain material that can be very technical or obscure. This may reflect a difficulty in sourcing enough suitable material. Futures is indeed 'broad church' and, to its credit, is not locked into a dominant paradigm. Increasingly, however, it does have a downside.

During its earlier years the journal had a full time staff located at the publisher's premises in Oxford. This meant that it was professionally edited and that authors could maintain clear lines of communication with those actually producing the journal. In more recent times all such editorial functions have been completely 'out-sourced'. The current editor works from a home office in London; the publisher merely provides residual support functions for the journal (and many others) from centralised offices elsewhere. A similar shift is seen in the way the editorial board operates.

In the late 1980s regular board meetings were held alongside major conferences that would attract as many dozen or twenty board members from various countries. Each would be provided with a substantial folder of information about the journal's circulation, subscriptions and finances. Beyond this there were in-depth discussions about editorial policy and future directions. Over the last decade or so, however, such practices have

ceased altogether and the board's functions have shrunk to a mere two: talent spotting for new material / writers and refereeing submitted papers. The editor sometimes provides a brief annual and informal overview, but that is all.

The economics of the journal raise serious questions for the future field. In 2007 the subscription rates were given as US\$262 (individuals) and US\$1 087 (institutions). While the actual circulation figures are now 'commercial in confidence' the figure of 600 subscriptions has been mentioned as 'optimum' from an economic viewpoint. So it's obvious that the income from this journal is substantial. Moreover, such subscriptions are not the only source of income. There are also subscriptions paid by university libraries that embrace a number of journals and may run to six figure sums. Finally, copies of individual articles are currently sold 'over the author's heads', as it were, for US\$30 each. (NB. This issue is considered again below.) In other words, the Elsevier 'juggernaut' has progressively come to view Futures merely as a 'cash cow' to be 'milked' without regard for the journal itself or, more importantly, what that journal might once have stood for – a collective expression of concern for the future of humankind and its world; the rise of futures studies and applied foresight as a set of human and cultural responses. While the journal continues to play a valuable role within the field in terms of the diffusion of ideas, case studies and methods, it is now far less responsive to the original purposes and returns no financial value to the field at all. What began as a genuine human and professional concern to create and sustain an advanced futures discourse for the benefit of all has been captured by corporate blindness and greed.

MS: 1 d; 2 a b; 3 a b c d; 4 a b c; 5 a b c 6 UK

Foresight: the journal of futures studies, strategic thinking and policy

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. So, in spite of having an editor of proven ability and an equally high quality board, the trajectory of Foresight seemed, in some ways, to parallel that of Futures.

Always more practitioner-oriented than the latter, 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 two 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.

MS: 1 d; 2 a, b; 3 a, b, c; 4 a b c d; 5 a b; 6 UK

Technological Forecasting and Social Change

Technological Forecasting and Social Change has been published since 1969/1970, so it is obviously filling a need among practitioners and those who work in the area of science and technology policy and forecasting. The publishers of this journal describe it as “a major forum for those wishing to deal directly with the methodology and practice of technological forecasting and future studies as planning tools as they interrelate social, environmental and technological factors. Papers are overwhelmingly case study reports or project outcome reports, and cover an wide range of areas such as nanotechnology, agriculture, ICT and industries such as meat industry, mobile phone industry and the like.

There are frequent methodological studies – Delphi, scenarios, cross impact analysis, environmental scanning – many of which are theoretical rather than reporting on the use of the method in a particular context or country. There is also, notably, a more social element in some papers such as linking longer term foresight research and short term market research, and exploring human centred systems in an ICT network society. TFSC also publishes frequent special issues, with recent ones being focused on terrorism, greenhouse gases, emerging trends in science and technology and reports of conferences. There are some more general articles such as “Turning Point: the end of exponential growth” by Robert Ayers but even in such articles, there does not seem to be much challenging of present, Western focused worldviews which, given the editorial board is predominantly from the USA, is probably to be expected. There is an occasional article on building capacity in futures work, and evaluating foresight exercises (Georghiou and Keenan), but the journal is dominated by reports on short to medium term projects and work.

The future in most articles is narrowly defined (not surprising given the focus of the journal), and therefore limited in scope in terms of its approach. Its intended audience is reported as Architects, Urban Planners, Industrial Engineers, Systems Engineers, Political Scientists, Military Experts, Futurologists, Corporate Planners. There are many contributors who appear in several issues, indicating if authors can work out what the editors like, and keep producing it, they will get their articles published, which is always a good thing for academics in particular.

MS: 1 g; 2 a; 3 a; 4 a, b; 5 b, c; 6 USA

Metascan totals

Future Times	1 e; 2 b; 3 N/A; 4 a b c d; 5 a c d; 6 New Zealand
JFS	1 g; 2 b c; 3 c d; 4 b d; 5 a b c; 6 Taiwan (ROC)
FRQ	1 b; 2 a b; 3 a b; 4 a c; 5 a; 6 USA
Future Survey	1 b; 2 a b; 3 a b; 4 a c; 5 a b; 6 USA
Futures	1 d; 2 a b; 3 a b c d; 4 a b c; 5 a b c 6 UK
Foresight	1 d; 2 a, b; 3 a, b, c; 4 a b c d; 5 a b; 6 UK
TF&SC	1 g; 2 a; 3 a; 4 a, b; 5 b, c; 6 USA

This survey has considered seven futures journals - clearly a small sample. Yet it arguably identifies what are considered to be the major publications of the field. A somewhat different picture, perhaps, could have been derived by considering ‘lower tier’ publications put out by a range of organisations, either free of charge or on a limited subscription basis. Yet such material not only has a limited circulation (which makes it of secondary importance in this context) it is also beyond the current scope.

What the results above suggest, however, is quite clear. First, these publications are in the main supported by three kinds of organisations: professional, university based and private firms. Second, the social interests that they represent depart only minimally from the wider pattern seen throughout this study. That is, while pragmatic and progressive

interests are prominent, it is the latter that is most often seen in the journals. Civilisation work, however, remains rare. Third, we're back on familiar ground regarding methodologies. Linear and systemic methods share first rank, with critical and integral ones receiving progressively less attention. Fourth, the same pattern is shown with focal domains. Structural and intersubjective domains lead, with behavioural and psychological ones less common. Fifth, with respect to capacity building, we see conceptual foundations as coming first, following by methods and tools, enabling structures and processes, with social legitimation lagging behind. Finally, three of the journals are published in the USA, two in the UK, one in New Zealand and one in Taiwan (ROC). Overall, therefore, this metascan suggests that the journals reflect the general structure and pattern of the field very closely.

Implications for the field

If the journals represent the current structure and preoccupations of the field, then one would have to say that the latter is in poor shape. Consider the following:

- two of the leading journals are suffering from being over-commercialised;
- apart from a very few universities, there's little evidence of broader educational interest in the field;
- at least two of the journals represented here are 'run on a shoestring';
- the dominant social interests, preferred methods, most investigated domains and approaches to social capacity building all reflect earlier conceptions of 'what FS is about'; and therefore,
- there is little that is innovative, new, dynamic and unambiguously progressive to be found here.

A conclusion to be drawn, therefore, from this part of the survey is that the field is 'middle-aged' or perhaps even metaphorically senescent. The one outstanding exception is JFS, a young journal, due to its unusually up-to-date and innovative profile (progressive and civilisational; critical and integral; intersubjective and psychological). Yet it is one of those mentioned above that is 'run on a shoestring' and also completely dependent upon the good offices of the current hierarchy at Tamkang University. With founder Clement Chang well over retirement age, there's no guarantee that Graduate School of FS that he established there will remain in favour long term. What this means is that the most promising journal we have cannot, at this point, be assured of its own future. Thus the field is poorly provisioned for its own future.

The two most profitable journals (Foresight and Futures) are both commercially owned and subject to the limitations described above. As such they pose a huge economic dilemma for the field. Depending on various assumptions, subscriptions to Futures probably amount to something like a quarter of a million pounds annually. If a fraction of this sum were available to help further develop and promote the field it could very well reach a more dynamic and effective stage of development and usefulness. But the fact is that currently some of the field's leading intellectual property (IP) is being 'skimmed off' wholesale and then 'sold back' to universities, government departments and corporations

– in many cases over the heads of those whose IP it is in the first place. In other words, what is driving the field economically is very clearly not any agenda that represents its own (diffuse) self-understanding or legitimate interests. Rather, these have been subverted by commercial self-interest and, it must be said, a rather ‘disconnected’ and idealistic lack of hard-edged business acumen within the field itself.

The WFS, which is the largest futures organisation anywhere, is itself a declining entity characterised by being almost exclusively US-centered, irredeemably populist, regressive in its thinking and incapable of engaging with the social and civilisational dilemmas facing the US, let alone being able to constructively engage with other people in other cultures. Its publications are resonant of an earlier worldview and characterised by a refusal to understand, value or engage with leading-edge developments in the field.

What this analysis leads to, therefore, is a view of a field in serious decline and poorly served by most of its regular journal publications. This suggests that something genuinely new is needed if the field is to be refreshed and reinvigorated for the manifestly challenging tasks ahead.

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*This research was undertaken as part of the State of Play in the Futures Field (SoPiFF) study commissioned by the Foundation for the Future, Seattle. The papers were published as a special issue of *Foresight* Vol. 11 No. 5, 2009. The notation method used in the study was provided in Slaughter, R. The state of play in the futures field: a metascanning overview, in the above issue, pages 6-20.