

The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies 2020

Introduction

The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies (KBFS) arose from ideas and conversations in various locations around the world during the early 1990s. A major concern at the time was that Futures Studies (FS) was expanding and diversifying but core features such as organizations, methods, and literature were sometimes hard to identify or evaluate. How would practitioners define their field(s) of interest and how could new entrants find their bearings? Moreover, there were growing concerns that FS could be seen as a purely Western phenomenon. In which case where were those “other voices,” other views and, importantly, other “ways of knowing?” I wrote to as many practicing futurists as I could around the world requesting their insights and support.

The first incarnation of what later became known as the KBFS was a special issue of the journal *Futures* published in May 1993. It contained seven main articles, ten “divergent perspectives,” and no fewer than five annotated bibliographies from different regions of the world. It was intended to be critically aware, gender neutral, multicultural, and critically informed. The first edition appeared three years later in 1996 as a three-volume set of hardcopy books in a sturdy slip case. It was launched that year in Washington, DC at a World Future Society (WFS) event and in Sydney, Australia at the Futures Foundation. It garnered some very positive reviews and was quickly seen as a welcome addition to the literature. Students from the Houston Foresight program even referred to it as a one-stop-shop.

While most understood “knowledge base” to be merely a useful metaphor, some questioned whether it suited a field as diverse and fluid as FS. In order to emphasize its process orientation and openness to diversity and change, it therefore made sense to publish a follow-up paper describing the KBFS “as an evolving process.” A couple of updates ensued and, with the valuable assistance of my son Rohan (an IT specialist) the first CD-ROM version was produced in 2000. It provided a stable, easy-to-use format that, unlike the heavy hardcopy books, was easy to mail. A further five years were then required to produce the 2005 Professional Edition. The introduction to that edition can be found [here](#). And that is where the KBFS could very well have ended.

In the years that followed I remained deeply immersed in futures work as an independent futurist, freshly liberated from academia. I continued to write, review, edit, and perform occasional consulting jobs. But I was no longer immersed daily in the active networks and intense exchanges of ideas and influences provided by universities. Yet it was unusual for a year to pass without being reminded of the KBFS and wondering how it could be updated.

I was particularly galvanized when I returned to earlier work of undoubted quality that now sat unregarded in the dark recesses of publishers’ archives. I could not avoid the fact that most commercially published work only saw daylight for a brief time before vanishing behind unassailable paywalls. Nor was that the only issue. Physical copies, journals, and author offprints with multiple, uncomplicated uses had disappeared, leaving only the traces of significant amounts of human effort and professional value hidden away in distant “cloud” repositories. Two key issues arose. One was that only those with privileged access could use this vast trove of hidden knowledge. More seriously, however, no guarantee was or would ever be provided regarding the long-term conservation and maintenance of this material. Digital files have many flexible and handy uses in the here-and-now. What is less well

appreciated is that the commercial case for long-term archiving of digital material is problematic at best. State-run and -financed libraries operate on an entirely different basis, but they too have human, organizational, and budgetary constraints. It's no exaggeration to conclude that most or all of this digital trove will, at some point, disappear. No knowledgebase-type exercise could possibly begin to compensate for this defective system of profiteering and expropriation. But it became a "burr in the saddle" that kept reminding me that work of considerable value and salience was continually being lost.

During these years something else had been going on. The Association of Professional Futurists (APF) was steadily growing into a world-spanning organization comprised of active and talented people from a range of futures-related disciplines. A combination of idealism and experience, along with a willingness to put the new capacities of IT to good use, meant that the APF had rapidly become a lively and distinct success. The original World Future Society (WFS) had folded some years previously and the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF), with which I'd been closely associated, continued on its own rather quiet and restrained path. But the APF was going places. Its in-house journal *Compass* provided a lively compendium of news, reviews, and articles of genuine interest.

When Jay Gary became the new chair of the APF I felt there might finally be a chance to do something with the KBFS. I contacted Jay and was assured that he felt it was well worth doing. Moreover, the APF would be willing provide a small budget (for copyediting and production) to help make it happen. My initial delight, however, was moderated by concerns about how difficult it would be to manage such a project on my own. That's when I contacted Andy Hines, who agreed at once to be co-editor. Andy and I knew each other well. As well as catching up at conferences he'd also been a guest at the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI) back in 2003 during my time as Director. Thus in early 2019 we got started on our list of prospective contributors.

Throughout that year we, along with a small group of helpers, sought to uncover some of the best published work from the previous decade. We were not primarily focused on various "legends" of our field, people whose work was already well-known and widely appreciated, so much as on recent work by emerging writers. To assist with this we assembled a simple list of criteria, as follows.

- Does the article represent an important innovation or change in the field?
- How new and fresh is the material?
- Is it of exceptional quality?
- Does it introduce new voices, including emerging futurists?

Kristin Nauth, our copyeditor, kindly took a look at the house style used for the previous edition and a few details were updated. We provided prospective authors with this as well as a short "Author Guidelines" summary. Perhaps three-quarters of the final collection was generated by writers who produced new versions of earlier work. For the rest we asked a few people for contributions on specific topics. By early 2020, just as the Covid-19 pandemic was beginning to impact the world, nearly all the papers had been copyedited and publishing agreements signed.

As this introduction was being finalised a stream of comments and proposals for informed responses to the pandemic appeared on the APF website. A known "wild card"—the coronavirus—had emerged to become a global catastrophe. It's too early to speculate what

kind of world will emerge once the pandemic has run its course, or how long this will take. Among the many proposals, however, there are bound to be references to improving our capacity for high-quality environmental scanning and vastly increasing its active role in decision-making across the board. One point of reference for such initiatives is over twenty years old—Laurie Garrett’s *The Coming Plague: Newly Emerging Diseases in a World Out of Balance* (1994, London: Virago Press). The key is in the subtitle. As long as human civilisation continues along its present destabilising course, the world will be “out of balance.” It follows that the present pandemic, challenging and frightening as it may be, can be seen as merely one expression (or continuation) of a worldview and *modus operandi* that has long called out to be thoroughly revised and redressed. KBFS 2020 does not address the current crisis directly. But it contains a number of powerful messages for the kind of disciplined enquiry and practice that the world needs now more than ever.

Andy and I trust you will enjoy the ride and, like us, find inspiration and courage on nearly every page.

Richard A Slaughter
Brisbane
April 2020