

Foresight as an Outsider Activity

Timothy C. Mack

ABSTRACT: Futurist consultants who work with client organizations are typically outsiders, who may bring subjectivity to their foresight work but also less expertise in the client's industry than insiders possess. Challenges include recognizing internal competing constituencies, engaging participants across departmental silos, building stakeholder networks, and overcoming an issue many consultants face of clients' expectation not just to advise but also to implement strategies based on the foresight work.

FORESIGHT AS AN OUTSIDER ACTIVITY

By Timothy C. Mack

Introduction

Over the past 70+ years, foresight has become increasingly more accepted worldwide across a broader range of settings, thus achieving an almost mainstream status. The growing instability of the past decade has highlighted the need to continue to improve futures research and policy techniques for dealing with ongoing chaotic and complex challenges, such as political instability, global pandemics, and cultural clashes, which are now becoming a new normal.

It is thus worthwhile to consider how foresight could operate even more effectively. One analytical possibility might involve investigating a view of the futurist as a classic outsider. This could show how futurists now approach their work, how futurists and their audiences interrelate, and how both of these areas might be improved.

Futurist as Consultant

There are several ways to look at the term *outsider*. One assumption is that a futurist's approach is focused upon specific organizations or industries rather than a global or macro approach, such as that which the Club of Rome took for its report *Limits to Growth*. Accordingly, one meaning of outsider could be *not a member of a specific group of interest*, as an outside consultant would be. I make the assumption here that foresight actually has much in common with consulting of all stripes, with both arenas driven by a perennial observation that "We are too close to the problem and cannot see the forest for the trees!"

AAI Foresight Report
Spring 2021



About the Author

Timothy C. Mack is managing principal of AAI Foresight Inc. and former president of the World Future Society. He may be contacted by email at tcmack333@gmail.com

Foresight Reports are published periodically by
AAI Foresight Inc.
1619 Main Street #1172
Freeland, WA 98249

www.aai foresight.com

Editor: Cynthia G. Wagner
CynthiaGWagner@gmail.com

In other words, the concept of the *third-party opinion* has an enduring appeal: It promises to bring information to the discussion of a problem or approach while hopefully avoiding the danger of internal competitive interests co-opting outside advisers. I can remember numerous instances where internal special interests engaged me during consulting engagements to lobby their self-interested personal and political points of view.

Foresight as Secret Knowledge

A second meaning concerns a person outside a specific viewpoint or even society in general. Foresight has been seen by some as an esoteric discipline, and thus possibly suspect. The field seems to evoke a mystique, its practitioners bearing secret knowledge to benefit the client but not the general public (and thus avoiding public oversight). It has been suggested that, like the attorney or the doctor, the futurist should be regulated as a professional—that is, someone who draws on well-defined skills and experience to advise in a manner not available to the layperson and whose competence, therefore, should be subject to testing through a formal certification process.

There is a range of university-level programs worldwide that focus on foresight across interrelated areas. These academic programs cover a variety of academic disciplines—e.g., public policy, business, climate science, economics, and even architecture—and they vary in academic standards and focus. It remains true, however, that there are currently few requirements for the licensing or governmental certification of futurists.¹

Foresight as Omniscience

A third aspect of outsider is the quest: Will a practitioner successfully integrate the goals and mores of the specific arena under examination with the future trend dynamics that may impact that arena—that is, how these trends will influence and alter an area of interest? One concern is that a generalist (as futurists may be) may fail to grasp the specialized knowledge, issues, and dynamics relevant to that arena's operations. Of course, it has always been essential that a futurist be a quick study, able to relate relevant foresight techniques to the driving forces of specific industries, organizations, geographic areas, or areas of study (e.g., climate change, population, renewable energy, etc.).

One hopeful assumption of this quick-study approach is that the basic principles of the foresight discipline are compatible with a wide range of other professional disciplines, including technology assessment, public policy, or even military strategy. But some of these integration processes may prove more challenging than others.

In fact, part of the appeal of the scenario-building process in foresight is the involvement of knowledgeable insiders from client (or industry) leadership to provide technical, regulatory, and even cultural detail for a foresight analyst's use. As I have learned from personal experience with past clients, such as the U.S. Defense Logistics Agency, the very act of sitting around a table with others of their own organization, as each describes how their part of that agency functions (or does not function), can prove just as enlightening to insider participants as it is to their foresight advisers, because internal organizational silos remain all too common.

Another approach to this integration challenge is the use of *weak-signal* techniques, which often involve constructing ongoing advisory networks drawn from a range of relevant parties, both inside and outside an organization or government that is under examination (individuals or groups who could therefore be thought of as stakeholders). These networks track trends that may impact the environment surrounding the entity in question. Their reports (which may vary in detail and focus) are then scanned for robustness—taken here to mean how often any item (or set of comparable items) is duplicated across a range of participant reports. The more often a trend or trend set appears, the more robust it is judged to be, thus moving from a weak to a stronger signal.

The advantage of stakeholder networks, comprising interested or affected parties who would or would not benefit from specific outcomes (depending on the fortunes of the entity in question), is that members are likely to be motivated to participate in assuring that decisions are well-informed. And of course, outside consultants might sometimes have their own agendas and motives, which could further shape (or misshape) the advice offered.

The flip side of the above observation is that, in my experience and that of others, clients may also have unstated agendas in mind, such as a specific future or set of recommendations, thus motivating them to work toward a third-party reinforcement of those previously reached conclusions. In such a case, the distinction between objective facts and ideological values can become quite porous and at times problematic—as has been seen in a political context recently in the United States.

Futurist as Bridge Builder

Having covered the standard dictionary meanings of “outsider,” we move on to more esoteric viewpoints. Colin Wilson, in his groundbreaking book *The Outsider*²—the first edition of which was published in 1956, about the time the futures industry started rolling in such places as the Stanford Research Institute (1945) and RAND Corporation (1948)—describes outsiders as “yearning for integration” across a wide range of arenas. This fits my own holistic vision of foresight as a cross-disciplinary view of the world. Or, in response to the

question, “What does the futures approach include?” my own answer would be “What *doesn't* it include?”

But this expansive view of the purview of futures does not make the process any easier. Quite the opposite. For one thing, cultural dynamics can be a less visible driver of technology in the marketplace. Different technologies can interact to enable or disable the acceptance of other related technologies in unforeseeable ways. One classic example is the shaping of climate change policies by the nearly exponential improvement of tools for environmental analysis. Another is the just-as-exponential expansion of DNA analysis in the past few decades and its impact on 21st century medicine, law enforcement, and other arenas. As has been noted, when a greater number of new technologies reach markets simultaneously, they can enhance mutual disruption almost logarithmically. While these patterns can be clear in hindsight, their speed and range are not always as clear at the time. Thus, effective cross-disciplinary analysis can be viewed as uncharted land or *terra nullius* (but in the sense of *uncharted* rather than *unowned*).

Accordingly, one aspect of the outsider dynamic in foresight is the risk of miscalculating cross-impact or technology acceptance, thus being dismissed or misunderstood by clients or the public in general (i.e., out of sync with the zeitgeist). This can be through “operator error” or through a series of factors that work against hitting the target in an increasingly complex and perplexing world.

This includes the sometimes expressed yearning for a scientific foresight discipline. In contrast, the Colin Wilson book argues that integration of rational and nonrational thinking is a more productive goal—i.e., how can science and intuition interact? Is foresight an art or a science or both? I would argue that Wilson is correct that integration of those two aspects of human thought is quite useful, especially for cross-disciplinary analysis.

As an illustration of the range of approaches of individual futurists, I will cite an experience of decades past with the U.S. Small Business Administration. A group of futurists, recruited by the late Joe Coates, came together in a Capitol building hearing room for a day to talk about their visions of the future of small businesses in the United States and the environment these businesses could expect to be operating in five years from then. Then Joe did something quite unique in revisiting that question half a decade later with as many of the initial participants who could or would return for a revisioning.

The most interesting contrast between the first and second SBA events was in how the futurists responded. A few attendees contrasted their prognostications between SBA meetings no. 1 and no. 2 and where they were right and wrong, and then analyzed both outcomes, thus addressing the reasons for their success or lack of it. This proved to be quite useful.

However, there were other presenters who reeled off sets of foresight conclusions very similar to the ones they provided five years earlier. One observer actually noted out loud, “Wow, I swear that was word for word!” The point to be made here is that the future is very seldom a static arena, and any assumption to the contrary is very likely to be wrong. Here I would harken back to Heraclitus (535–470 BCE), the pre-Socratic philosopher who opined that “the only thing that stays the same is that nothing stays the same.”³

Accordingly, intuitive methods may be just as useful as science and reason for working with transformative dynamics. I would argue that the ideal, again, is some combination of those two. As this discussion of futurist as outsider develops, it becomes more apparent that, while being an outsider does offer some neutral third-party status, the opposing role of insider also has its benefits, including better communication with audiences and integrated policy development.

Communication Clarity

One challenge of foresight is how to educate clients (and the general public) concerning what futures analysis can provide and what it may not—the most evident is the development of possible and probable futures, in order to guide options for response. This is in contrast to hard wired and tightly defined predictions, which can leave those who follow them flat-footed when unanticipated wild cards (or black swans) appear on the scene.

Some of these education challenges can be addressed by the use of heuristics—i.e., by creating mental shortcuts that assist in solving problems or learning new ways of thinking about the future—and effectively communicating about the use of those tools. In the 1970s, researchers Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman (in the AAAS publication *Science*) identified three key heuristics: *representativeness*, *availability*, and *anchoring and adjustment*. These three techniques can be useful in managing areas of uncertainty, which is the essence of foresight.

- *Representativeness* can be used to judge the probability of a certain class of events or processes.
- *Availability* can assess scenarios that are employed to assess the plausibility of a particular development.
- *Adjustment from an anchor* can be employed to numerically relevant values if they are available.

Communication Counterforces

While a better understanding of how to best assess and present scenarios is useful, there are other subtle stones in the road that may skew how a foresight presenter communicates to an audience when discussing possible futures. One of these “stones” consists of the biases held by the participants (both presenter and audience). Bias is defined as “prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair.” When considering biases, a review of types is helpful.

- *Confirming bias*: preexisting preferences for a specific finding that can lead to the discounting of contradictory information (or at least holding it to a lesser level of critical scrutiny).
- *Optimistic bias*: underestimation of the cost, timeline, and risk attached to a suggested problem’s solution.
- *Implicit bias*: subconscious stereotypes applied on such bases as race, gender, age, ethnicity, or disability that discount the value or viability of a proposal.

Another dynamic (at times overlooked) in foresight analysis is the impact of status perception dynamics. In other words, foresight recommendations and assessments may be seen through the filter of “How will this outcome or policy affect the status of myself or my interest group?” In their paper “Hypotheses on Status Competition,” William C. Wohlforth and David C. Kang, professors of government at Dartmouth and the University of Southern California, respectively, write that “social status is one of the most important motivators of human behavior.”

For example, in politics, status competition (especially in the United States) is increasingly evidenced by both public and private display of negative emotions, including envy, jealousy, and resentment. This has spurred ever more intractable conflicts between left and right political persuasions, such as U.S. Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives. In summary:

- Informal hierarchies of status appear in nearly every international system. Status is defined here as relations of dominance and deference and includes the acquisition of prestige, esteem, honor, standing, rank, or face. Those positions of status are achieved or conferred through collective beliefs and social processes. Scholars ground this dynamic in social identity theory.

- Many people openly strive for high status. While status can bring material reward, research shows that higher status can be preferred as an end in itself. When the possibilities available include both material rewards and social status, a significant number will accept substantial trade-offs for status over material rewards.
- Status appears as a positional good, in that its value depends on social comparison; i.e., how much status one has in relation to others. High status is inherently scarce, in comparison to most other valued goods. Accordingly, competitions for status operate as a zero-sum process, which in game theory is a situation in which one person's gain is offset by another's loss, so the net change in wealth or benefit is zero.

As one can imagine, such dynamics often skew outcomes unexpectedly when not considered in analysis, especially when an innovation is perceived as threatening existing status structures, and can also affect how audiences receive and understand foresight assessments.

Techniques for Meeting Foresight Challenges

Obstacles to neutral and accurate critical thinking and communication can also be addressed by decision *postmortems*, best conducted prior to final policy implementation. A postmortem involves a candid assessment of the possibility of subsequent failure for the proposed solution and a related visualization of possible causes for such a failure. In contrast to the less effective approach of “what might go wrong,” the assumption of actual failure coupled with a backcasting-type analysis can enhance risk awareness and more clearly highlight potential obstacles and pitfalls.

I think back to a conference presentation in Singapore (organized by Peter Ho, former senior civil servant who was subsequently with the Centre for Strategic Futures) in which I was asked to address the range of ways that what seemed like solid analysis could produce unwelcome outcomes or even wrong results. This request came from a sense of those “stones” that had fallen into the path of foresight projects in the past. And, just as in survey and polling work, the answers you get often depend on the way you ask your questions.

But the tools for neutral critical thinking may not always be available. In fact, value-neutral analysis seems to be going by the wayside, where such previously regarded analytical entities as the U.S. Office of Budget and Management have shifted from a neutral competency role to a policy-enhanced role over the past several decades. In the U.S. Congress, the disappearance

of the Congressional Clearinghouse on the Future and the Office of Technology Assessment in the late 20th century raised the question of whether value-neutral analysis is even possible in our present environment. Perhaps it was never realistically possible, but it lately appears not even to be an aspirational goal.

Another interesting question concerns normative foresight in general. Should the question of “How can change occur?” be held entirely separate from “How *should* it occur?” These are not easily resolved issues, especially when the norms held by futuring participants are not always shared or even fully disclosed.

To split dichotomies in another way, foresight is often a combination of subjective and objective analysis.⁴ The term *objective* can stand for science and reason, and *subjective* may stand in for the attitudes and opinions of the myriad groups and individuals who impact the future (or desire to), both locally and globally. As has been said in a number of ways, what makes the future so difficult to consistently anticipate is that it is full of people.

Since people are emotional as well as rational creatures, they can have biases (overt and covert) and concerns about how change might affect their status in relation to others. Accordingly, factual analysis may be understood through the filter of personal values, and embraced or discounted accordingly.

Foresight can be a normative enterprise (whether acknowledged or not): a strategic search for positive outcomes. But what constitutes a positive outcome is often in the eye of the beholder. It could be argued that politics is a branch of foresight—it identifies desired outcomes and strategies to reach them—but many may see that view as going beyond a classic vision of foresight (if agreement can be reached on what that might be).

Certainly the range of foresight users—governments, corporations, not-for-profits, etc.—is very broad, and it is also likely that the range of outcomes seen as positive (or those outcomes perceived as negative and thus to be avoided) is even broader. With this in mind, the concept of a futurist outsider becomes increasingly blurry, for what thought process is there that is not in some part subjective? This is a major challenge of both descriptive and normative foresight, but it implies that integrating the two is part of being a successful and effective futurist.

Clearly there is much conflict over what the true path in foresight is or should be: what to look at, how to look at it, what trends to focus on, what impacts to care about, and so on. The axiom “Whose future are we talking about anyway?” is becoming increasingly relevant. Plus, the geometric increase of global conflict, global diversity, chaotic systems, etc., shows little sign of abating, thus increasing the complexity of the process.

At this point, it seems that our initial inquiry concerning foresight as an outsider activity has no one clear answer, and a great many possible and probable ones. But the question continues to seem an important one, at least to this observer, if only because it encourages us to look more closely at what we do, acknowledging the truism that “the unexamined life is not worth living.”⁵

Shifting Self-Image

Finally, the transformation that may be underway in the U.S. Democratic Party might also signal changes in attitudes toward foresight, as both appear to be a moving away from a long-term corporate (top-down), formulaic approach toward a more socially activist or progressive role, with an expanded and interactive range of participation in social change. But how that will play out among both futurists and U.S. Democrats is still unclear.

To restate, the classic futurist stance of coming into a situation, proclaiming findings, and departing⁶ and the rather academic stance of “we do analysis but don’t do implementation” may be moving toward a “we’re all in this together” stance, both tracking and actively shaping change. Accordingly, I will issue a normative opinion, which is that it would assist in the relevance, impact, and utility of forecasting to increase the expectation of implementation assistance when offering a range of available services (as some futurists are already doing).

However, perhaps nothing can address the sometimes contrary nature of the audiences for foresight presentations. This brings to mind a presentation I had done for all the city managers in Nebraska. In that case, my presentation on the impact of climate change and shifting demographics in that state was greeted initially with hostility, because it could not possibly be right, and then a few years later remembered with resentment, because it had turned out to be all too right—which was also my fault, as the bringer of bad news.

Ah, the fate of prophets.

Notes

1. Except for those restrictions concerning fortune tellers and the like on the city books in Bethesda, Maryland, where the World Future Society was headquartered for some 50 years (although these restrictions were never enforced against WFS).
2. A later edition of *The Outsider* includes a 1982 forward by New Age thinker Marilyn Ferguson, who spoke at WFS conferences in its early years.
3. As noted by Dr. Tom Lombardo in *Science Fiction: The Evolutionary Mythology of the Future, Volume One: Prometheus to the Martians*, Change Maker Books (2018) p. 78.
4. As Tom Mullins notes in the photojournalist publication *Bad Day*, images are often “interpreted subjectively and each image is itself a subjective reflection of a constantly changing reality.” And, on the status side, “being social animals, we remain curious about how others fare when treated roughly by circumstance.”
5. Or in the original Greek (ὁ ... ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ) as uttered by Socrates during his trial for impiety and corrupting youth in Plato’s *Apology*.
6. This brings to mind the old chestnut Edward Cornish sometimes included in presentations “I have no problem talking about what will happen tomorrow, even though I don’t remember the past or understand the present, as long as I have a ticket on a train out of town tonight.”

References

Thomas B. Edsall, “The Resentment that Never Sleeps,” *New York Times* Opinion, December 9, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/09/opinion/trump-social-status-resentment.html>

Steve Festor, “Consider the Opposite: Recognize and Minimize Your Own Biases,” *Washington State Bar News*, December 2020/January 2021 (Vol. 75, No. 1).

https://wabarnews.wsba.org/wabarnews/dec__2020_jan__2021/MobilePagedArticle.action?articleId=1645490

Tom Mullins, Foreword, *Bad Day*, DC Street Photography Collective, 2020.

Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman. "Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases," *Science*, New Series, September 27, 1974 (Vol. 185, No. 4157), pp. 1124-1131.
<https://science.sciencemag.org/content/185/4157/1124>

Colin Wilson, *The Outsider*. Jeremy Tarcher/Penguin Putnam, 1956.

William C. Wohlforth and David C. Kang. "Hypotheses on Status Competition," *Research Gate*, 2009. Paper delivered at American Political Science Association conference, Toronto, Canada.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228147044_Hypotheses_on_Status_Competition



AAI Foresight Inc. provides issues identification and tracking, strategic planning, organizational development, messaging, marketing, technological assessment, and strategic services for a broad range of clients.

Copyright © 2021 AAI Foresight Inc. All rights reserved.

1619 Main Street, #1172 | Freeland, WA 98249 | <http://www.aaiforesight.com>

Contact: **Timothy C. Mack**, managing principal, tcmack333@gmail.com

Cover art: [Alexandra](#) ♥ [A life without animals is not worth living](#) ♥ from [Pixabay](#)