

Abstract

Better Scanning and Beyond: Old Ideas and New Frontiers for Foresight

Nearly two decades ago, I was asked to give a keynote to a meeting on "Next Steps in Scanning," later published as *Scanning: An Imperfect Activity in an Era of Fragmentation and Uncertainty* (*Futures Research Quarterly*, Fall 1991). In the presentation, I focused on a dozen choices that we make, consciously or unconsciously, as to what we will or will not look at in our quest for strategic anticipation: mediated reality vs. direct observation, present vs. past, print vs. film, electronic vs. non-electronic, English vs. non-English language, fiction vs. non-fiction, books/reports vs. periodicals, fellow professionals vs. outsiders, credibles vs. non-credibles, optimists vs. pessimists, our ideology vs. other worldviews, and trends vs. probable/possible/preferable futures. These choices still deserve consideration, as well as my warning about the long-term trend to greater fragmentation. I also cited C. Northcote Parkinson, who taught at what is now the University of Singapore, for his astute formulation of the "Law of Triviality," whereby we spend time on an agenda item in inverse proportion to its importance. Still sadly true, and more important than ever.

My 2008 "mini-guide" to *Many Methods and Mentors* assembled nearly 100 items on thinking about the "five P's": Probable futures (forecasting, predicting), Possible futures (scenarios, wild cards), Preferable futures (agendas, visions, proposals), Present trends (indicators, transformations), and Panoramas (systems thinking, whole-of-society approaches). All good advice, and perhaps followed or even improved on by everyone at this Symposium and elsewhere. Yet, arguably, we are in the midst of a global megacrisis (see Halal-Marién survey), and we may be just as likely over the next decade to be "muddling down" to global disaster (or worse) as we are to be "muddling up" to a better world. Consider the five great US government disasters of the past decade: the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the subsequent invasion of Iraq, the Katrina debacle in New Orleans, the failure to heed IPCC arguments for global warming, and the Great Recession of 2008-2009. Warning signs were available in all five instances, but appropriate action not taken. And thus, scanning and anticipation are necessary, but certainly not sufficient. Beyond scanning, adequate attention must be paid to communication to leaders, workers, and citizens, with better efforts at information design in a world of infoglut and follow-through with appropriate action.

Horizon scanning and intelligence will always be imperfect, but improvements can be made. The interrelated "new frontiers" that I propose are old ideas whose time has hopefully arrived. In addition to conscious action to counteract Parkinson's Law of Triviality and pay far more attention to the big issues, serious attention should be paid to the 1937 proposal by H. G. Wells for a World Brain as a sort of public utility to supplement scanning efforts of private organizations and various governments, "Operation BASIC" proposed by my mentor Bertram Gross in 1964 to handle "the information problem," principles of information design proposed by Richard Saul Wurman and others in the 1990s, and better balancing the four types of scholarship

articulated by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 1990.