DELPHI/SCANNING METHODOLOGIES:

AN ELECTRONIC FUTURES SYMPOSIUM

Many futurists include the Delphi technique in their repertoire. To review an explanation of this technique, read an article by Trudi Lang, "An Overview of Four Futures Methodologies (Delphi, Environmental Scanning, Issues Management and Emerging Issue Analysis)," Manoa Journal, #7 (August 1995), pages 1-43.

(You may download that article from the following URL: http://www.soc.hawaii.edu/~future/j7/LANG.html.)

Yet not all futurists are ecstatic about Delphi's potential, some raising serious questions about how and how much (if at all) to rely on the Delphi technique. During July-October 1996, an extended discussion of the pro's and con's of Delphi took place on HRCFS-L, the futures e-mail discussion list.

Futurists participating in this electronic discussion thread are in the order of their first appearance, as follows: Cole Jackson, Jim Dator, Robin Brandt, Sohail Inayatullah, Michelle C. Bowman, Jordi Serra, Annette Gardner and Sally Taylor. The following lightly edited excerpts from that interchange highlight common ground and areas of difference. These, no doubt, will be further elaborated in the future. Participants' biodata appear following this edited symposium -- V.K.P.

COLE JACKSON: I am interested in Jim Dator's comment that he is no longer "thrilled" with Delphi. Why? We encourage its use in our futures studies program here; and I just want to have Jim's (or others') critique of Delphi, as well as of other futures tools we teach. Are there other futures tools that have fallen into disrepute? Just want to keep current as possible. Thanks. To those of you who will be at WFS [World Future Society] General Assembly, I look forward to seeing you again; and to those I haven't met yet, I hope you'll introduce yourself if we happen to cross paths.

JIM DATOR: Good question, Cole. And good to hear from you. I believe I also said in my reply that I still do ask students to take Dan Wedemeyer's futures methods course which features Delphi, so I obviously think it has value.

I just find, for myself, that it is impossible for me to answer most of the Delphi's I get. The questions imply perspectives on the future which I don't share, and there is no (formal) way in Delphi to express that. I also feel I am not truly expert in many of the areas in which I am expected to respond. I have started, and been unable to finish, every Delphi I have received recently because of that.

In addition, I believe that Delphi is still best when it is used to ask true experts in the area of their expertise, and the answers then used by the questioner to make the responses self-fulfilling (or self-denying) prophecies. (My example is when drug companies ask pharmaceutical experts to predict when a new drug will appear, and then use that information to fund and do the research to produce the drug. In contrast to you asking me--for example-- about where and when the next world war will begin. I truly don't know, and you can't do anything truly useful with the information, except maybe stay away--perhaps needlessly--from where and when I say war will break out.)

Is this useful, Cole? If you have more questions, please ask. And it is WONDERFUL to have this listserv used for a scholarly purpose!!

ROBIN BRANDT: As you are probably very aware, the Delphi has a number of problems in its use. And you may be interested to know that a class is offered at the University of Hawaii to instruct in the use of Delphi, cross impact matrices, and scenarios. I spoke to Harold Linstone, editor of Technological Forecasting and Social Change, at Portland State University. According to Linstone, the biggest problem with Delphi is that the person conducting the Delphi can really bias the results with the questions asked, by the persons chosen (and they talk among themselves if it really is a small group of experts), etc. There are several publications that I might be able to dig up that discuss the problems in more depth if you like.

SOHAIL INAYATULLAH: I don't find Delphi useful at all either. I prefer visioning workshops where shared meaning takes place, where new ideas about the future are created in interaction between participants and "experts"

I get requests to be a Delphi participant; and the questions just bore me--requests for specific forecasts, for such detail, forcing me into a prediction mode that I certainly do not feel I am qualified (nor do I think most others are, either).

Scanning seems more useful, looking for the unusual, the out-of-sync, etc. I suppose a Delphi done in the context of visioning, of a cross-cultural futures environment where the world views of many differing ways of knowing are incorporated could be useful, but then it would have to be a Delphi that self-deconstructed, that undid itself.

MICHELLE C. BOWMAN: Sorry if I'm belaboring the point, but I have to throw in my vote against Delphi as well. While I think the fundamental concept is sound (several minds are better than one), I see validating the "expert" opinions to be one of the biggest barriers to a successful study.

Just to throw this discussion into another turn, what do y'all think about scanning? If you could have a program that effectively scanned for information on the Internet, what would that program incorporate? (I ask this because I'm working with two programmers who are developing such a system, and we REALLY need input). Everyone remember the "Emerging Issues growth curve"? Where visionaries identify revolutionary ideas at the beginning of the curve, and the mass media picks it up at the end? (That's a rather rude interpretation, but you get the point. I hope.)

Well, where do ya'll think the Internet comes in now? If you were to revise that curve, which end does the net fall at? Do you think that the net has any role in identifying (esp. more quickly than traditional media such as academic journals) emerging issues/trends? These are all questions we're looking at, so any comments would be most appreciated.

JIM DATOR: Also great questions, Michelle.

I hope that Sally Taylor, who is a master scanner, is online and will respond. I know she uses the net, as well as conventional library cruising, for her scans.

It is my feeling that things are generally on the net before they are in print, and that scanning the net is necessary for any emerging issue analysis activity.

But how? Key words? I don't think so. I believe by definition, scanning is looking for something you don't know is there, and don't have a name for. It is finding new words (or old words in new contexts) that is the heart of the activity.

Is there any way to find that except just to surf? Can your knowbot do it for you?

And I think it is still the case that some of the earliest stuff won't even be online anywhere. But that might not be the case. What say others?

SOHAIL INAYATULLAH: I have not yet figured out how to use the net for scanning, although I imagine it would be like normal scanning--searching without any goals, just looking here and there. However, the best stuff I come up with is often from little newsletters and so on from all over the unnetted world; they are still the best sources in terms of unconventional issues, i.e., people on the margins of any culture, academia, the world system, gender, etc.

But the final part of scanning is the person, the range of theories and experiences she brings to her effort, he brings to the craft, and that has little to do with nets or libraries but almost an unnatural way of thinking.

We had a "what-if" meeting with academics and staff at the Communication Center, coming up with issues to develop an agenda for research, and really most of the folks there were just stunned or upset, while those in the room who were used to such exercises were just flying. (I still remember the upset looks when we suggested asking "is murder a form of communication": All said that has nothing to do with rigorous information/communication theory, and of course, that is what we want to do, undo conventional categories.)

Watching Jim scan, what I have noticed are two activities: 1) reading lots of information, and 2) seeing the information in strange ways. the strangeness comes from not being afraid and of growing up, learning/teaching in unusual circumstances.

So I am not sure if one can intentionally scan, i.e., have predetermined idea of the category one is looking for, clearly one is floating in between paradigms, searching for the difference that makes the difference. Perhaps

talking to a cow might be useful.

ROBIN BRANDT: I think scanning is essential to "decent" futures research but I am not sure that general cruising on the Internet is useful. I also don't think that scanning academic journals is necessarily a good place to scan. The way I interpret scanning is looking for surprises. (I believe that Sohail's message suggested or stated that). Academic journals seem to contain a lot of conventional wisdom rather than the oddities that a scan could turn up.

To set up a program for scanning, it seems that the keywords might need to be selected on a regular basis by someone looking for something specific. If one wanted to use the Internet, I might suggest hooking up with a number of interesting groups--and we all probably have favorites that could be suggested that are good for scanning. I appreciated people who forwarded interesting information to this group when I was working on my dissertation. I picked and chose very specifically but did NO general cruising on the Internet because it was a waste of time, IMHO. :)

JORDI SERRA: Although I realize that the discussion about the Delphi is a little bit surpassed, I'd like to add a couple of things.

I think that the worst problem with Delphi is that it has been heavily overused and misused. Every time someone thinks that he or she is in a dead end, well let's do a Delphi! Yet the Delphi is no panacea and can hardly serve as a solution for everything.

Second, there is the problem of the questions, how to ask them. Questions that ask for percentages or years may be very limiting for the "experts" but they sure ease the work of the conductor, on the other hand open questions are very difficult to systematize.

Experts, we all have problems with this notion, particularly when asking about an area non-clearly-academically or professionally delimited.

Despite all this, I see some value, for instance, it may be a way to get wide feedback during a research, and it is one of the few future methods that is commonly known and accepted. Sometimes it is useful to mention it as it allows you to introduce other less popular methods in a project. Now, I'd like also to comment on the predictive approach that the Delphi seems to reinforce; I acknowledge this, but we have to conscious that most of the people are looking for short range predictions. Lately I've been trying to market futures studies, and it is awfully difficult to find projects that go beyond the next five years. In this context I found that the Delphi is sometimes the only way you can introduce a longer span or, amazingly enough, alternativity.

Finally, I'm also not very thrilled about Delphi, and I apologize in advance if any of you receives a Delphi in which I'm involved and you don't like it. Well I think I'll try to avoid Sohail.

SOHAIL INAYATULLAH: One of the best forecasting pages I have seen on the web is something put out by newage.com. It is just stunning--with I-ching, astrology, runes, tarot--all for free, answers all questions. For the skeptics, ask Jim for Anne Yue's paper on the I-ching as a forecasting method (dating from around 1981). The point is not that tarot, etc., is accurate at forecasting but rather that it can give insight. It is a different way of knowing, as Anna Yue so well points out in her work. Answers are given in general parable terms so that one imbues the response with meaning. Individuals who have used this page consistently tell me that it has helped them make wiser decisions, increased their life happiness. Now if all forecasters could do as well as that....

ANNETTE GARDNER: Here are few additional thoughts on the Delphi/scanning discussion.

On scanning: I institutionalized scanning at IAF [Institute for Alternative Futures] many years ago, playing with a variety of formats and storage systems. It was the ideal situation: I had a rich and informative pile of journals, newsletters and databases to review. I even set up a library system that corresponded to IAF scenario matrix elements. However, the one shortcoming was that I couldn't launch an organization-wide scanning effort whereby staff would review publications of their choosing and share this information or write a paragraph for a database. Staff were unavailable or too busy. I probably benefited more than anyone, and the payoff came when I had to research and write Issue Papers--I knew the library better than anyone else.

Since that time I've focused more on the information dissemination side of scanning, that is, how to make this information useful. I wrote a short piece for the Hawaii Community Services Council, suggesting the easiest process possible, e.g., encouraging people to read outside their area of expertise. I do think we need to concentrate more on training others, and including scanning in the planning process.

On Delphi: I found the technique very useful in a course I taught in the Fall 1995 Semester, especially in terms of highlighting the usefulness of experts. More important was having students think about and develop the questions...they had to use their knowledge of the field (health) as well as make good use of the scanning exercise preceding the Delphi. We also had guest lecturers who served as "experts." Granted, the question can determine the answer, however, I found the Delphi to be a useful tool for certain futures concepts.

JIM DATOR: I have been very pleased with the discussion here so far. Cole, would you like to reply, since you initiated it.

Good show!

COLE JACKSON: Wow! Excellent! I appreciate all the responses on Delphi--will definitely keep in mind when refining our futures effort here. I understand well the tedious nature of many Delphi's, certainly they have some value, but often verge on overkill which then transforms them into road kill. "Modified" Delphi's can elicit much the same information, don't you think? Criticism of the use of experts also is well taken in that experts often become elites merely talking to themselves. I believe Sohail surely is onto something with his emphasis on visioning as involving a broad cross-section including some experts. Maybe it would be interesting to draw comparisons between Delphi or visioning results drawn from regular folks and those gained from the experts. My experience is that, once the filter of their parents' and other significant adults is removed, young 'uns perceive their

futures in quite different ways than the more jaded experts.

Anyway, I appreciate very much the input. I am intrigued by the scanning software initiative but need to process that concept a bit more myself. Now, what about cross-impact matrices? (JUST KIDDING!!...)

SALLY TAYLOR: Aloha. I the enjoyed Delphi/scan discussion. I believe Sohail described scanning in terms closest to my perspective.

It involves having an eye out for the unusual and out of sync, and his reference to Jim's method of looking/seeing in different ways. I would add that for me it is often serendipitous. I pursue an ongoing passive and active scanning process pretty much all the time, unless I tear myself away. I follow as wide a spectrum of multi-disciplinary and exotic areas as possible, and it's still a combination of print and digital. Technology is the core area for me and I find it involving most every other area in one way or another today.

In terms of a specific focus or project, keywords may lead to great and unexpected things, but in general it's open, and it's within that wide open expanse that something newly meaningful comes out. For me there's a process that starts with a consistent effort, learning the boundaries of the knowledge you study, mastering what you can, and uncovering emerging issues in various areas (it was "hypertext!" in 1984). However, the ideal desired result of scanning goes beyond that. The gift from scanning is a new image, a new thought formed from the many disparate bits and pieces. It doesn't exist in print, on-line, or in a file somewhere, it's new and it comes from the mind of the scanner.

The "generations" of futurists was also interesting. To me it appears to be generations of generations of generations from a variety of perspectives, in terms of the space/time frame of early futures, in terms of the distinct generations of futurists arising around individual futurists from various fields and countries, in terms of public or private focus, and in terms of time in general. There are what I would call "futures present" and "futures future" futurists. Elise Boulding refers to the two-hundred-year present (a time period stretching back a hundred years from today and stretching one hundred years forward from today). Most public and private organizations in the United States today, though even more aware of futures than ten years ago, still plan less than five years into the future. I would say we should go as far as a six-hundred-year present at minimum.

Again along the lines of Sohail's comments, in India the kalpa represents a temporal cycle of four thousand million years of human reckoning. Time is what we are. Time is what we have. It's about doing time, making time, and taking time. It's about time!

A mahalo to all on the list,

Meet the Delphi/Scanning Symposium participants! Here they are in the order in which their contributions appear above.

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