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REPORT

The futures of communication

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This article reports on the international World Futures Studies Federation Course on 'The Futures of Communication', held in Andorra in October 1994. The course was sponsored by the Centre Catalan de Prospectiva, UNESCO, the government of Andorra and the World Futures Studies Federation.

Jointly sponsored by the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF), UNESCO, the government of Andorra and the Centre Catalan de Prospectiva in Barcelona, an international course on the 'Futures of Communication' was held in Encamp, Andorra, 2–10 October 1994. About 40 participants, representing almost every continent, attended the course. Andorra was rich in experience for the course participants both in terms of the multicultural composition and the diverse academic backgrounds of the participants. Even though the course had directors (Felix Marti and Tony Stevenson) and faculty resource persons (Jordi Serra, Levi Obijiofor, Ana-Maria Sandi, Eleonora

Masini, Samar Ihsan, and Sohail Inayatullah), by and large, it was participant-run. They were the experts in their area, resource persons merely framed the communication discourse in the language of futures studies.

Tony Stevenson, the WFSF secretary general, and Felix Marti, President of the Centre Catalan de Prospectiva, noted that the multicultural composition of the participants was deliberate so that every participant could learn more about the different worlds in which we live. They urged the participants to be free to make recommendations and suggest changes at the end of the workshop, to take ownership of the course. Against this background, they informed the participants that they would be given time for self-reflection and to self-organize their final projects and plan of research.

Personal visions

Five resource persons spoke on their personal visions of the future. Felix Marti expressed the need for a dramatic change in the world. To him, futures studies represents a tool of wisdom which helps to sensitize us to the problems in our society. In his words, futures should be liberating,

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not closed. Our imagination should be free to roam the possibilities of the future. He attributed the imbalance in the global system to a lack of political will and ethical decision-making. The future should be decolonized and discontinued from the past, he argued, because we have more than one future. Consequently, we have to select the kind of future we want.

According to Nigerian Levi Obijiofor, everyone has a future, including epicureans who are committed to the pursuit of instant luxury. He noted that whatever activities we engage in today have consequences for the future. He argued that just as everyone tries to avoid actions that could put them in great danger, so too should we avoid taking actions today that spell dire consequences for the future generations. As he put it, 'we can, by our actions, prevent future disasters by what we do today'. He also argued that Africa needed to undergo massive social transformations, particularly with respect to increased power for women and the development of a pan-African identity.

Pakastani Samar Ihsan analysed the way in which futures studies had affected her life. She argued for change in the world, pointing out however that this change should be gradual. A sudden change, according to her, could lead to chaos. Change should not be perceived as a threat, she said, but should be accepted and tried as part of alternative futures. She also expressed concern about the future of women and cultural problems. She believed that even though Pakistan, for example, might undergo dramatic technological and political changes, the bureaucrat will still prefer a highly institutionalized system where she or he has special access to privilege. Telecommuting makes little sense when you have a driver, when all activities are class-structured. For there to be modernization, the class structure of feudalism, of master-serf relations must first break down, she argued.

Australia-based Pakastani Sohail Inayatullah examined the importance of global governance, the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), corporations and localism. He asked whether it was possible to have dialogue between cultures, when cultures use different categories to construct the real and when the world has been dominated by one culture for so long. For Inayatullah, the

purpose of communication is to begin to create a shared reality. He asked how might communication be transformed in the conditions of a global spirituality? He also examined trends such as virtual reality, genetic engineering, and the development of a noosphere, that is, a world where technology becomes living. Inayatullah also discussed the need for new models of development that touch on mental, physical and spiritual levels of reality.

Jordi Serra argued that the future is a space of freedom, a space of choice; it is truly the only virgin territory we have. It is also the ultimate resource for human projects, for our projections. The future is space of choice and of responsibility. Serra believes that so far most of us have only realized the freedom dimension of future studies. But only responsibility can give us real freedom. Serra believes that to act responsibly in the future means that we have to improve our knowledge about the future, therefore we must engage in futures studies. Not only that, futures studies can be a powerful tool for redesigning our present too. Futures studies should be part of everything we do, for we will spend most of our time in the future, in that open space, believes Serra.

After the resource persons had explored their personal visions, Tony Stevenson briefly introduced the background to WFSF futures courses. In the past, he said, WFSF courses were held in Dubrovnik (in former Yugoslavia), before the onset of the Balkan crisis. Since 1993, Andorra has been chosen as the European venue for futures courses. However, courses for the Asia-Pacific region have been held in Bangkok, Thailand and Bacolod, Philippines. Courses in the next few years might be held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Questions about the future

In the afternoon session, participants explored futures studies through question-led discussions. Some of the questions raised are listed below.

- (1) When does the future start?
- (2) Is there a way out of chaos through futures studies?
- (3) Is communication necessary for the future?

- (4) Is it possible to implement futures research?
- (5) What is the scope of futures studies? What topics are covered?
- (6) What roles do individual cultures play in futures studies?
- (7) How can we adapt our cultures to our environment?
- (8) Does the future mean dreaming about an ideological, utopian-like situation?
- (9) How do we protect the cultures of developing countries from Western high-tech invasion?
- (10) What basic problems will the future bring to us?
- (11) What will be the role of the mass media in the future?
- (12) What will follow technical communication?
- (13) Why should we worry about the future?
- (14) Is there a difference between conventional thinking and futuristic thinking?
- (15) Can an average person be a futurist?
- (16) What is the future and science of religion in a united world?
- (17) What is the future of futures?
- (18) Can futures studies be limited or is it boundless?

According to Tony Stevenson, one of the values of futures studies lies in our ability to challenge our system, to attempt to intervene at critical points and transform it. He believes that although the future is often at a distance, decisions must be taken now. Inayatullah argued that the future should be seen as critical (contesting power relations), interpretive (seeking to understand difference) and empirical (forecasting). The task is to use all three to forecast the future of communication technologies: to determine how different cultures perceive the role of these new technologies, and then contest how they have come about, and how they can be used both for empowerment and for docility.

Besides lectures, there were various group sessions and exercises during the course. For example, 'what-if' questions were put to four groups of participants. They were asked to report on the implications of each issue on the world and in their own life. The questions were:

- (1) What if 90% of the world had access to Internet?

- (2) What if the world's intellectual, financial and cultural centre move to South Africa?
- (3) What if the UN headquarters moved to Andorra with a staff of six?
- (4) What if AT&T and Xerox take away the powers of nation-states and issue electronic passports?

The purpose of these questions was to break out of the present, to begin to think of alternative frames of reality. Less important than the actual occurrence of the issues was how they contest current definitions of technology, global power, bureaucracy and of territorial sovereignty.

Futures methods

On the following day, Eleonora Masini (Italy), Ana-Maria Sandi (Romania), and others gave an introduction to futures methodologies. In her presentation, Eleonora Masini reminded participants that the future does not belong to one person, it belongs to everyone. In her view, we cannot think about the future in an objective way. According to Masini, the moment we begin to think about the future, we experience excitement and fear.

She pointed out that as human beings approach the end of a century, there is always a strong urge to understand the future. The past is important for understanding the future, she said, and it cannot be separated from the future. In her words, the future of the future is in the future. Hence, the need to think in the long term.

Eleonora Masini listed various characteristics of futures studies. These are: (1) transdisciplinarity; (2) complexity; (3) globality; (4) normativity (values to be perceived); (5) scientificity; (6) dynamicity; and (7) participation. Futures studies also has limits which futurists often fail to discuss. These include: (1) self-altering (self-realizing, self-professing) aspects; (2) psychological aspects (fear of the long term, focused on the short term); (3) irrational aspects; (4) implicit hypothesis; (5) forecasts based only on available data; and (6) a *posteriori* verification.

She also outlined the different methodological approaches to futures studies. These are: objective (based on data qualitative and quantitative); subjective (based on experts' knowledge); and,

systemic (based on systems theory).

The objective methods, according to Eleonora Masini, are trend extrapolation, historical analogy, strategic management, issues management, risk analysis, environmental scanning, and scenario building. The subjective methods are: brainstorming, Delphi, and cross-impact analysis. Systems methods, in addition, include issues management, risk analysis, as well as global models.

For Masini, scenarios, however, are the most important method in futures research. There are different kinds of scenarios including: (1) a trend scenario—the most possible, probable and plausible; (2) a contrast scenario—extreme situation, opposite to trend scenario; and (3) a utopia scenario—the most desirable one. Scenarios are the instruments of decision making, they lower uncertainty/mistakes, but they do not forecast, they describe. They should be flexible and participative. Scenarios also distance us from the present, allowing us to re-create it. They exist not to domesticate temporality or even to aid in making better decisions, but to transform it.

Ana-Maria Sandi, one of the directors of the first Andorra course, and director of the UNDP/Women In Development Project in Romania, gave a detailed presentation of cross-impact analysis. She said that impact studies first appeared as a way to determine the second- and third-order impacts of new technologies and to explore systematically the interrelationships between events and trends. It has come to be used in a variety of ways, including as a way to empiricize expert opinion. In her workshop she asked participants to imagine they were professional communications consultants and to analyse what the impacts of new communication technologies would be on actors, processes, subsystems and the system as a whole. She also had the group develop problems, solutions and feedback to the solutions.

In the afternoon session, Sohail Inayatullah presented emerging issues analysis and the group collectively explored a new futures method, causal layered analysis. Emerging issues analysis attempts to discern problems before they become systemwide, while they are still seeds. In addition to searching for the seeds of the future, it is also necessary to open up the present, so as to create the possibility for the

future. Causal layered analysis attempts to deconstruct problems, to make problematic 'events', 'trends' and 'issues'. Inayatullah argued that how one frames the problem changes the solution. Causal layered analysis looks at the many dimensions of a problem: its official cause as presented in the media, social science analysis, world-view or discourse analysis, and as myth/metaphor. The challenge is to move up and down the layers of analysis, bringing in as many levels as possible.

Communication futures

On the following day, Tony Stevenson further developed the theme of the meeting by introducing the participants to issues in communication theory. He said that communication signifies understanding and sharing. 'Communication is the sharing of meaning and therefore understanding of it'. As an example, he mentioned the word 'love' and asked the participants to list the words that convey the same meaning as the word love. On the basis of the divergance of meanings, he stated that meanings are socially constructed, based on our culture and experiences. He said that the word *communications* (plural) is applied to technology but *communication* (singular) is more linked to meanings.

Apart from understanding and solving a problem, Tony Stevenson argued that even misunderstandings help in solving problems. It is often wild ideas which can end up being beneficial to society. When we have a cross-cultural community, he said, there is a greater chance of creating new ways of doing things. According to him, communication is a process of interaction, a multipurpose process, and not a two-way process. He also dwelt on the latest concept of communication, 'Superhighway'. He said that the superhighway is a network of communications that will give us extra capacity and more signals to communicate. The superhighway has the potential, he argued, to globalize further or to localize, centralize or decentralize further.

In his presentation, Levi Obijiofor spoke on the futures of communication for development. To understand the origins of communication for development, he said that we must first understand the dominant theoretical models of development and

how these Western perspectives have influenced the practical notions of development in developing countries. He noted how emerging issues in development such as increased participation by local groups, ecological sustainability, gender and equity, self-reliance, human rights and attainment of basic needs have changed the direction and dimension of both theoretical and practical conceptions of communication for development.

A panel discussion on communication in Asia was held later in the afternoon. Samar Ihsan spoke about the rapid progress Pakistan has made in communication technologies since 1988. Special areas mentioned were mobile telephones, dish antennae, computers, facsimile machines and other communication technologies. She said that local people were happier with the communication multinationals than they were with the politicians. Nataya Tananone (Thailand) spoke on the effects of the mass media in Thailand focusing on how the mass media played a major part in shaping public opinion during the 1992 pro-democracy demonstrations. Rao Yadavalli Dinkar (India) spoke about Indian cinema and how it plays an active part in depicting the values, lifestyles, emotions and character of the Indian people. He argued on behalf of Westernization, arguing that it gave young people, like himself, more choice. Jo Villanueva (Philippines) and Hoai Chi Truong (Vietnam) dwelt on the impact of the mass media and cellular mobile 'phones on their societies. James White (Hawaii and England) spoke about different communication satellites operating in Asia. He asked who speaks and who owns, arguing that these technologies have paradoxically different regulators, owners, programmers and consumers. For example, in one emerging scenario, the Chinese military supply a satellite for American CNN with Taiwanese and Hong Kong feature programming. Consumption is for East and South Asia, with the broadcast being illegal only in China.

The session on 'Communication in Africa' was led by Levi Obijiofor, Patrick Dikirr (Kenya) and Zaali Majanja (Uganda). They explained various forms of communication processes in rural Africa focusing on how the telephone would change the processes of communication in Africa. Through a make-shift drum, Obijiofor,

demonstrated to participants the sounds that the 'gongman' uses in disseminating information in the villages of Nigeria. Both Patrick Dikirr and Zaali Majanja elaborated on the dramatic impact of mass media (radio and television) in their societies.

At a workshop on the futures of communication, Auli Keskinen and Marja Liisa Vihera (both from Finland) used the Robert Jungk method to explain new means of communication for education in the future. They designed questions as a way of identifying learning situations and finding ideas and needs for communication means and tools for the future to fulfil those ideas. The participants were asked to respond to the questions (which were displayed on posters) and to evaluate the answers by awarding different 'stars' to the responses they considered most appropriate.

Scenarios and backcasting

The session on Saturday, 8 October 1994, focused on scenario building and backcasting. Resource persons explained the richness in the ways scenarios are constructed. As an example, participants were asked to create various scenarios of the future, using the year 2050 as a base line. Participants were grouped into two. Some participants gave their personal visions of life in 2050, and some made stories about their lives in 2050 and the world around them. Most of the visions were of a sad and dismal world, lonely, technology-driven, and devoid of human warmth and feelings.

Later, participants self-organized into five groups and worked on different projects. Each group presented its project on the last day of the course. The first group named their project Students Network Organization. Their motto was to foster love, peace and friendship in the world. This group comprised of Riffat Mushtaq (Pakistan), Bishnu Pathak (Nepal), Nataya Tananone, Sodsri Paoinchan (Thailand), Thee Wongdeethai (Thailand) and Hoai Chi Truong.

The second group presented a script of an animated file titled 'Where from Babylon?'. It was based on human ambitions for glory and power, to capture the future through technological advancements. The story ended on a note of over-ambition and its repercussions, of humans having gone too far. This was based on the

the old Biblical story of the ill-fated construction of the Tower of Babel. The group members were Samar Ihsan, Natasha Todorovska (Macedonia), Rao Yadavalli Dinkar, Jo Villanueva, Linc Yow Yeh (Australia) as well as Vladimar Vuletic and Eva Kamerer (both from Yugoslavia).

The third group presented a soap opera, a satire on life during the 21st century. The theme was on how computers and machines would command our lives. Consequently, human emotions would take a bizarre and complicated form. The group comprised Eduardo Santos (Brazil), Vicent Partal (Spain), James White, Pia Karolina Alvesalo (Finland), and Rosa Estades (Spain). Each participant wrote a chapter of script and then collectively this was formed into a mini-novel. Characters romped in virtual sex and journeyed throughout the world in search of mystical secrets, all the time trying to locate their own changing identities.

The fourth group presented a handbook of futures studies and scenario building. The group presented the case of Andorra and the major problems it could face in the years ahead. The first scenario was a crisis scenario where tourism collapses leading to depopulation and a return to agriculture. In the second scenario, Andorra becomes a victim of its own urban growth. In the last scenario, Andorra becomes an information, and eco-tourism/health centre. The contradictions in each scenario were also developed. The group was comprised of Liv Ingrid Borg (Norway), Patrick Dikirr, Paolo Bizzarri (Italy), Davide Colombo (Italy), Enric Bas (Spain) and Luca Rondini (Italy).

The fifth group presented a project on scenario building. Their preferable scenario was international cooperation in all spheres such as politics (global governance), technology, economy, social structure, science, sports and other areas. They also back-casted their probable scenario of international cooperation. The group members were Zaali Majanja, Scholten Maartje (Holland), Inigo Erize (Spain), Pim Lammes (Holland) and Anil Rawat (India).

Oleg Boudantsev (Russia), Eduard Chmelar (Slovakia), Jordi Juan (Catalunya), Jordi Morros (Catalunya), Enric Ordeix (Catalunya), Clemente Penalva (Spain) and Antoni Ventura (Catalunya) also participated.

Besides day workshops and lectures, participants self-organized in the evenings. These included videos from home nations, discussions on sovereignty and culture (Catalunya and Aboriginal Australia), the future of journalism and a presentation by Marti Olivella on the NGO, Eco-Concern, working for an alternative model of development and news writing in Catalunya.

Evaluation

The final session involved an evaluation of the course by the participants. Suggestions included having more participants from Latin America, having small group sessions that covered areas such as music, dance and art, summarizing the day's outcomes, and on a lighter note, one participant noted that the environment and the food were so good that it was difficult to concentrate on the course.

Tensions existed between action-learning and scholarly lecture approaches to teaching futures and communications. Action-learning emphasizes that each person must experiment and self-organize his or her own research. The traditional scholarly approach believes that technical knowledge must be imparted from expert to student. Resource persons committed to action-learning attempted to collapse the distinction between participant and expert. This approach was uncomfortable for many who expected information to be handed to them in short, efficient overhead projector notes. The lecture format was tiresome for participants who preferred more small-group, self-organized workshops. At the same time, the action-learning approach forced individuals into spaces of interaction before they were prepared to do so, before they felt professionally comfortable to handle them. This led to calls among participants for more structure, more expert presentations. They needed more basic information on the futures field and communication theory before they could imagine the futures of communication.

Organizers, resource persons and participants all searched for a balance between theory, data and values; between expert lecture sessions and workshops; between action-learning and authority-led knowledge dissemination; between futures theory content and communication theory

content; and between organization from above and self-organization. At times it was reached, at times not. Finding a balance is a difficult process as organizers, resource persons, and participants all come from different academic, cultural, and personal backgrounds. The challenge is to continue learning from each other's approaches and

categories of knowledge, and not settle on any one formula, but remain committed to a dynamic, changing balance of pedagogy.

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