TWELVE THINGS JOURNALISTS NEED TO KNOW to be Good Futurist/Foresight Reporters

J. Bradford DeLong is a professor of economics at UC Berkeley, and was an economic advisor to President Clinton. Susan Rasky is a senior lecturer in journalism at UC Berkeley, and was an award-winning reporter for the New York Times. Together, they have compiled the Neiman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard lists of what economists need to know about journalists, and what journalists need to know about economists, in order to result in useful and accurate economic reporting. The lists are straightforward, and if followed would make a world of difference.

This is a remarkably good idea, one with direct application in a number of disciplines that are important for society but prone to obfuscation and confusion in the press: environmental science; bioscience; computer science (pretty much all sciences, in fact); developments on the Internet; and, of particular focus here, futurism and foresight. It's too easy for poorly-informed journalists to skim off unrepresentative (but sound-byte-friendly) examples and concepts, and help to further public confusion instead of help to clear it up.

This isn't because journalists are corrupt or stupid or anything like that: by and large, they're generalists talking about fields that they probably didn't study, under time and financial pressure from editors and publishers who almost certainly know even less. It's a wonder that reportage about science, technology and the future isn't worse than it already is.

Although I think the "12 Things Journalists Need To Know" model has broad application, I'm only going to look at the futurist/foresight area here, and am only going to compile the list for journalists writing about futurists. Fortunately, the instructions for economists about journalists is quite applicable to academics and specialists across disciplines.

Here's my initial draft of 12 -- what would you change?

1. Nobody can predict the future. This should go without saying, but too often, reports about trends or emerging science and technology tell us what will happen instead of what could happen. In fact, most futurists and foresight consultants will avoid making any predictive claims, and you should take them at their word; any futurist who tells you that something is inevitable probably has something to sell.

2. Not everyone is surprised by surprises. The corollary to #1, be on the lookout for people who saw early indicators of surprises before they happened. Just like an 'overnight success' worked for years to get there, the vast majority of wildcards and 'bolt from the blue' changes have been on someone's foresight radar for quite awhile. When something happens that "nobody expected," look for the people who actually did expect it -- chances are, they'll be able to tell you quite a bit about why and how it took place.

3. Even when it's fast, change feels slow. It's tempting to assume that, because a possible change would make the world a decade from now very different from the world today, that the people ten years hence will feel 'shocked' or 'overwhelmed.' In reality, the people living in our future are living in their own present. That is, they weren't thrust from today to the future in one leap, they lived through the increments and dead-ends and passing surprises. Their present will feel normal to them, just as our present feels normal to us. Be skeptical of claims of imminent future shock.

4. Most trends die out. Just because something is popular or ubiquitous today doesn't mean it will be so in a few years. Be cautious about pronouncements that a given fashion or gadget is here to stay. There's every chance that it will be overtaken by something new all too soon -- and this includes trends and technologies that have had some staying power.

5. The future is usually the present, only moreso. Conversely, don't expect changes to
happen quickly and universally. The details will vary, but most of the time, the underlying behaviors and practices will remain consistent. Most people (in the US, at least) watch TV, drive a car, and go to work -- even if the TV is high definition satellite, the car is a hybrid, and work is web programming.

6. There are always options. We may not like the choices we have, but the future is not written in stone. Don't let a futurist get away with solemn pronouncements of doom without pressing for ways to avoid disaster, or get away with enthusiastic claims of nirvana without asking about what might prevent it from happening.

7. Dinosaurs lived for over 200 million years. A favorite pundit cliche is the "dinosaurs vs. mammals" comparison, where dinosaurs are big, lumbering and doomed, while mammals are small, clever and poised for success. In reality, dinosaurs ruled the world for much, much longer than have mammals, and even managed to survive a planetary disaster by evolving into birds. When a futurist uses the dinosaurs/mammals cliche, that's your sign to investigate why the "dinosaur" company/ organization/ institution may have far greater resources and flexibility than you're being led to believe.

8. Gadgets are not futurism. Don't get too enamored of "technology" as the sole driver of change. What's important is how we use technology to engage in other (social, political, cultural, economic) activities. Don't be hypnotized by blinking lights and shiny displays -- ask why people would want it and what they'd do with it.

9. "Sports scores and stock quotes" was 1990s futurist-ese for "I have no idea;" "social networking and tagging" looks to be the 2000s version. Technology developers, industry analysts and foresight consultants rarely want to tell you that they don't know how or why a new invention will be used. As a result, they'll often fall back on claims about utility that are easily understood, familiar to the journalist, and almost certainly wrong.

10. "Technology" is anything invented since you turned 13. What seems weird and confusing will become familiar and obvious, especially to people who grow up with it. This means that, very often, the real utility of a new technology won't emerge for a few years after it's introduced, once people get used to its existence, and it stops being thought of as a 'new technology.' Those real uses will often surprise -- and sometimes upset -- the creators of the technology.

11. The future belongs to the curious. If you want to find out why a new development is important, don't just ask the people who brought it about; their agenda is to emphasize the benefits and ignore the drawbacks. Don't just ask their competitors; their agenda is the opposite. Always ask the hackers, the people who love to take things apart and figure out how they work, love to figure out better ways of using a system, love to look for how to make new things fit together in unexpected ways.

12. "The future is process, not a destination." -- Bruce Sterling The future is not the end of the story -- people won't reach the 'future' and declare victory. Ten years from now has its own ten years out, and so on; people of tomorrow will be looking at their own tomorrows. The picture of the future offered by foresight consultants, scenario planners, and futurists of all stripes should never be a snapshot, but a frame from a movie, with connections to the present and pathways to the days and years to come.

When talking with a futurist, then, don't just ask what could happen. The right question is always "...and what happens then?"

Tags: Futurism, Journalism

Posted by Jamais Cascio on June 14, 2006 3:00 PM | Permalink | View blog reactions

Hey, good stuff...

I might add that a lot of people say they're futurists, but what does that mean? You don't become a futurist by thinking about the future - you become a futurist by understanding where the present could lead.

In your #1, I might've added something about how futurists can't predict the future, but they can help create it by defining scenarios that feed into a roadmap consistent with their clients' goals.

Doing the environmentalist version would be a great thing. I suppose I would start by saying no environmental or client scientist wants to make a hard and fast prediction about what the climate will do, because there are so many variables and scientists work with hypotheses, not dogma. That may make them seem hesitant to commit to an interpretation of events... however this doesn't mean that they don't have a good idea what's happening, and why.
#8 is "key" and you might want to expand on it.

I worked at a place for a few months where the CEO had "completely" drank his own kool-aid. He once told me that eventually, the company's product (basically an enhanced online chat experience) or one like it would replace the telephone. He was serious.

It is claims like this that seriously harm the credibility of anyone making futurist prognostications. In this example, the person completely ignored the fact that the telephone has remained in a form relatively unchanged UI-wise for the last 120 years... for a reason. It is an elegant solution to the problem it solves. We have made it smaller and more portable, but even in this digital age it is still fundamentally a device that you talk into and listen to to converse with other people at a distance.

Ignoring the way people use technology and what people want from it guarantees failure, no matter how cool the technology in question seems to be.

Agree, #8 is key. It's also the crux of Stanislaw Lem's critique of science fiction 30 years ago - of all the US sci-fi authors around, he believed Dick was the only one capable of exploring the effect of future technology on future people, instead of just describing transporters and time machines. Oddly, one of the worst offenders in this area I've ever read was Bruce Sterling's Schismatrix, which doesn't even bother touching the why's in favor of the what's & how's.

Here's my initial draft of 12 -- what would you change?
((I'd change a whole lot. I could spend all week changing this. But I've just got to stop somewhere.)))

1. The future belongs to the open-minded. If you want to find out why a new development is important, don't just ask the people who brought it about; their agenda is to emphasize the benefits and ignore the drawbacks. Don't just ask their competitors (I'm social opponents): their agenda is the opposite. Always ask the hackers (I'm academics, regulators), the people who love to take things apart and figure out how they work, love to figure out better ways of using a system, love to look for how to make new things fit together in unexpected ways.

2. Not everyone is surprised by surprises. Be on the lookout for the people who saw (I'm published) early indicators of surprises before they happened. Just like an "overnight success" worked for years to get there, the vast majority of wildcards and "bolt from the blue" changes have been on someone's foresight radar for quite awhile. When something happens that "nobody expected," look for the people who actually did expect it - they didn't "predict the future," because that's impossible, but they will be able to tell you many useful and cogent things about why and how it took place.

3. The future is usually the present, only more so. The details will vary, but most of the time, the underlying behaviors and practices will remain consistent. Most people (in the US, at least) watch TV, drive a car, and go to work - even if the TV is high definition satellite, the car is a hybrid, and work is web programming.

4. There will always be avant-gardes and backwaters. Important changes can't happen quickly and universally. Any important social change will create at least some reactionary counterforce.

5. There are always options. We may not like the choices we ((I'm see to have now, but new situations create new choices.)) The future is not written in stone. Don't let a futurist get away with solemn pronouncements of doom without pressing for ways to avoid disaster, or get away with enthusiastic claims of nirvana without asking ((I'm what people would do next after utopia arrives.)))

6. "Technology" is anything invented since you turned 13. What seems weird and confusing will become familiar and obvious, especially to people who grow up with it. (The most important technologies are the huge, old, taken-for-granted technologies already massively integrated into everyday life.) The real utility of a new technology won't emerge for a few years after it's introduced, once people get used to its existence, and it stops being thought of as a "new technology." Those real uses will often surprise - and sometimes upset -- the creators of the technology.

7. Even when it's fast, change feels slow. It's tempting to assume that, because a possible change would make the world a decade from now very different from the world today, that the people ten years hence will feel "shocked" or "overwhelmed." In reality, the people living in our future are living in their own present. That is, they weren't thrust from today to the future in one leap, they lived through the increments and dead-ends
and passing surprises. Their present will feel normal to them, just as our present feels normal to us. Be skeptical of claims of imminent future shock.

8. Gadgets are not futurism. Don't be hypnotized by blinking lights and shiny displays just because they make such good copy. (((Ask the full set of journalistic questions of a gizmo: who, what, when, where, how, why? Why would people want such a thing? Which people, which demographic? What do they plan to do with it? What's the killer application? Where's the revenue stream? What's the track record of the people introducing this innovation? Does it do anything genuinely novel?)))

9. Most trends die out. (((No tree grows to the sky.))) Just because some trend is (((sexy))) today doesn't mean it will stay sexy in a few years. Be cautious about pronouncements that a given fashion or gadget is here to stay. There's every chance that it will be overtaken by something new all too soon -- and this includes trends and technologies that have had some staying power.

10. "The future is a process, not a destination." -- Bruce Sterling The future is not the end of the story -- people won't reach the "future" and declare victory. Ten years from now has its own ten years out, and so on; people of tomorrow will be looking at their own tomorrows. The picture of the future offered by foresight consultants, scenario planners, and futurists of all stripes should never be a snapshot, but a frame from a movie, with connections to the present and pathways to the days and years to come.

(((Addendum))) Please try to avoid the following annoying cliches of journalistic futurism:
dinosaurs and mammals, sport scores and stock quotes, astrology-style predictions of the inevitable, utopias, oblivions, part of the steamroller or part of the road, etc etc

Posted by: Bruce Sterling | June 18, 2006 2:56 AM

What about a futurist's track record of past predictions or even ways to determine what qualifies a given person to be a futurist?

If I'm writing a sports story and getting predictions from a sports expert, I'm going to want to know their track record of calling games or why their knowledge is any better than my crazy uncle Harry's knowledge.

Why wouldn't one of my first questions of a futurist be, "What have you gotten right and what have you gotten wrong in the past N years? What makes you qualified to talk about the future of XYZ?"

Posted by: jet | June 18, 2006 5:48 PM

I suggest changing #1 into: The future is not there to be predicted, but to be created. The fact that nobody can predict the future may not stop people from trying. I think a good futurist is not working to predict the future, but to create it.

Posted by: Rikkert | August 10, 2006 5:47 AM

I see a Name FUTURE that has no languge barriers and i see
In the people and there own languge ect For and by the people Own FUTURE . I see FUTURE Name word as a country and the people and any country as a global infranstruture .Iv been fighting for Years FUTURE monopiles .. My name is kent G Anderson Im president founderr of www.futurevisionaries.com
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Posted by: kent anderson | October 2, 2007 7:15 AM