Futures landscapes and futures cognition

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Scenarios have been established for several decades now as the dominant mode for conceptualising the future within businesses and other organisations. However, scenarios, and their underlying idea of multiple possible futures that need to be explored simultaneously, are hard for humans to deal with cognitively and also hard to communicate afterwards.

In this presentation, we will explore an alternative approach–the futures landscape–that has been developed and deployed over the past decade with dozens of organisations, commercial and non-commercial. It has been applied by different practitioners in a range of different settings. We will also assess its strengths and weaknesses against using a scenarios-led approach.

This is more than a set of technical distinctions. We hypothesise that scenarios are processed cognitively as "possible futures", and as a result have a weak bridge to present action.[2] The futures landscape, in contrast, is hypothesised as an "emergent present", and therefore has a stronger bridge.

The notion of the 'futures landscape' was adapted in the early 2010s from morphological approaches to futures work (Coyle, 2004, Ritchey, 2008)[3,4]. A number of fields or domains are identified inductively from an initial scan or drivers analysis. Typically there are four-to-seven of these, representing distinctive sub-systems of the overall "system under scrutiny" for the project.

These domains are analysed both narratively and through systems tools such as causal loops to ensure their robustness. In turn, this combination of narratives and loops makes it possible to identify and analyse both critical issues and emerging opportunities in the overall landscape.

In practice, the 'futures landscape' approach improves the cognitive legibility of futures work by making it easier to move from the sense-making stage of the work to the investigation of implications. However, it may reduce the range of possible futures that are

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[2] The terminology of "the bridge to the present" is drawn from Wack, P. (1985), 'Scenarios: Uncharted Waters Ahead'. *HBR*.
[3] Coyle, G. (2004). *Practical Strategy*, 63-65. Harlow: Pearson Education.
[4] Ritchey, T. (2008). 'Morphological Analysis'. *Futures Research Methodologies, V3.0*. Millennium Project.

opened up for exploration, although there are tools that can mitigate this. Equally, however, the 'futures landscape' process ensures that weak signals of change remain more visible in the process.

At the same time, the experience of practitioners is that the futures landscape approach also makes the socialisation of the futures-based insights that have been developed more straightforward. Explanations of emerging futures patterns, and the opportunities and issues arising from them, are more comprehensible to those who have not participated in the process. As a result this can create greater organisational alignment around emerging issues and opportunities, and how to respond.

In a scenarios project, the process is often the product. But in organisations, senior time and attention is always short. They are unlikely to engage in the process, but their engagement in understanding and processing the outcomes is necessary for effective outcomes from the work.

The role of cognition in futures work is an under-developed area of study (Camacho, 2023, says it is "still in its infancy").[5] The work that has been done (see Rhemann, 2019, Conway 2022) has focused more on the role of neuroscience in helping us to create images of the future, rather than interpreting them.[6,7] Suddendorf *et al* (2022) argue that foresight is an essential element of human cognition, but do not address the reverse question.[8] The study of socialisation of futures work is also under-developed. Boisot's (1994) more general model of the social learning cycle may offer a framework that can help futurists consider how futures insights are processed and transmitted within organisational cultures.[9]

For these reasons, consideration of the cognitive questions involved here is necessarily tentative. However, it is at least possible that the focus of the futures landscape on the emergent properties of the present, rather than the speculative properties of the future, removes some cognitive barriers to consideration of the narratives that the futures landscape offers. This area will be the subject of further investigation over the next few months.

This paper is proposed to the conference under the topic of interest on 'Surfacing futures in the present'. It will include worked examples from projects that have utilised this approach, so as to have value to both practitioners and theoreticians.

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[5] Camacho, J. (2023). 'Naturalising futures sensemaking: An opportunity to bridge the gap between futures and cognitive science.' Medium: Institute for the Future.
[6] Rhemann, M. (2019). 'Deepening futures with neuroscience.' *World Futures Review*, 11(1).
[7] Conway, M. (2022). 'Exploring the links between neuroscience and foresight'. *Journal of Futures Studies*. Vol. 26 No 4.
[8] Suddendorf, T., Redshaw, J., and Bulley, A. (2023). *The Invention of Tomorrow*. New York: Basic Books.
[9] Boisot, M. (1995). *Information Space*. London: Routledge.