



CENS INSIGHT

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Horizon Scanning and “Innovation Journalism”

“Media history has shown that news stories are the first drafts of history. What if journalism is also the first blueprint of the future?” ---Turo Uskali, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Horizon scanning—the systematic and continual survey of the environment for nascent or emergent indicators of change—is clearly an idea whose time has come. Originally conceived as a corporate “sense-making” tool, the concept has extended well beyond its traditional focus to become increasingly employed in a wide variety of domains: counter-terrorism, military intelligence, public health, ecological preservation and economic planning—to name just a few.

One virtually ignored area in which horizon scanning has caught on is in the field of journalism. Coined as “innovation journalism” by David Nordfors, journalists of this niche specialize in writing about new or developing ideas, practices and technologies that may have ramifications in the future. The relevance of these “innovation” journalists cannot be overstated. First, they play a critical role in informing society about the potential areas of change so that people can better anticipate and adapt to them. As the saying goes, “a teacher reaches hundreds of students; a journalist reaches at least thousands or millions of readers”. The public awareness that has been created will leave society in much better position to recognize threats or opportunities that follow these potential changes. Second, and more importantly, “innovation” journalists—by virtue of their public voices, inevitably shape the future trajectory of these changes. By openly raising questions that provide critical feedback or generating the publicity that is needed to promote growth in an area, they become indirect agents of change themselves.

There are, indeed, a rising number of “innovation” journalists who are already making their presence felt. It is certainly worth taking a look at some of these journalists and their work.

For a start, one of the most respected doyens is Joel Garreau of *Washington Post*. Called a “big thinker” by famed futurist and inventor, Ray Kurzweil, Garreau is well-known for commenting on technological trends that offer the promise of transforming human life and the way in which humans see themselves—the so-called “radical evolution” effect. One such trend being explored by Garreau is biological engineering. Garreau believes that bioengineering is moving along such a fast growth curve that possibilities will exist in the future in which human faculties will be inordinately improved. From running fast, becoming stronger, turning healthier and transcending the barriers of ageing, Garreau argues that it is not a far-fetched proposition that the “superhero fantasy may yet become a reality”. In fact, the inexorable transformation of the human species will usher in a world in which future generations are radically different, inaugurating an era of what Garreau calls the “post-human”.

Given the possibilities, Garreau poses an interesting question: what are the implications when the average human being lives well over hundred years? As he muses, “what happens in a world that can be increasingly young and vital and robust and busy at the same time that it is also increasingly very, very old? What happens to social security? How many careers does one have? How many marriages does one have? How many children does one have?” The point that Garreau makes is unmistakable: the “post-human” may well have repercussions that will fundamentally alter the social and cultural fabric of society, ushering in new norms and lifestyles.

Other than Garreau, another notable journalist is Michael Rogers of *MSNBC*. Also concurrently appointed by *New York Times* as their “futurist-in-residence”, Rogers pens the widely-read “Practical Futurist” column for *MSNBC*. While Rogers looks at the multitude of emergent areas, he is especially renowned for his incisive views about the impact of the digital revolution and its future forms. For example, Rogers talks about Web 2.0, the internet development that has spawned “user-oriented” sites such as *MySpace*, *Digg* and *Youtube* in which online practices of tagging, ranking and self-publishing are becoming increasingly prevalent. In particular, Rogers highlights the “do-it-yourself effect” of Web 2.0, arguing that the individual empowerment provided by these internet technologies will help create a culture of citizen journalism and social activism.

Likewise, Rogers also examines the growing phenomenon of information digitization: the process in which “books are being relentlessly turned into bits”. Rogers points out that more and more libraries, archives and booksellers are digitizing their books, creating a future whereby “every manner of content” may be found by a mere click of a mouse. In Helsinki, for instance, Rogers notes that there is a virtually “bookless” library that features technology and multimedia information. Meanwhile, the undergraduate library of the University of Texas at Austin has metamorphosed into a 24-hour “information commons”. The upshot of this trend is clear: the world may well be set for an information explosion, augmenting the already scary knowledge repository that is the Internet.

Last but not least, there is Chris Anderson from *Wired* magazine, the acclaimed journalist of a respected periodical that has won five US National Magazine Award nominations, including the top prize in 2005. Anderson is famed for his “long-tail” theory, first espoused in a ground-breaking 2004 article. According to Anderson, the economy is moving away from “a relatively small number of hits (mainstream products and markets) at the head of the demand curve and towards a huge number of niches in the tail”. This is the view that the traditional “one-size-fits-all” formula is becoming increasingly outmoded in the marketplace,

in which specialized products may become the future norm. Driving these changes are the receding online costs of production and distribution, which Anderson contends will make “narrowly-targeted goods and services become as economically viable as mainstream fare”. Furthermore, Anderson argues that it is simply human nature to “gravitate towards niches” because people want choice: consumers are more likely to buy products that satisfy their particular interests rather than mass-production, run-of-the-mill fare. In short, the “long tail” postulates that the future of markets will be about niches. The success of online retailers such as Amazon and iTunes are already being cited as classical examples of this phenomenon.

To be sure, the names of Garreau, Rogers and Anderson are only three of the more influential names in terms of “innovation” journalism. There are others out there as well. For horizon scanning analysts in and out of government—tasked with sensing what trends and ideas are coming and what they would mean for societies and governance—the work of the better “innovation” journalists, rather than being regarded as esoteric, should instead be seen as required reading.