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A Return to Community? The futurist's view of what lies in store

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Presentation by



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*Future Files: The History of the Next 50 Years***

Before we start I think I think I ought to explain myself a little. I wrote a book a couple of years ago called *Future Files: a History of the Next 50 Years*, which, amongst other things, predicted that the global economy was going to collapse due to the level of debt and the networked nature of risk.

Ever since this I've kind of been labelled as a futurist. Now to begin with this term made me squirm. It's actually not even correct. It's actually 'futurolgist' because my Mum, who used to be an art teacher, points out that futurists are actually a school of Italian painters from the 1930s. But never mind. My Dad used to be a scientist and he just sort of gives me one of those stares, thinking that I should get a proper job I guess.

I can predict the couple of things you are wondering. The first thing is probably "What on earth does a futurist do (and why don't you get a proper job)". The second one is whether it's even remotely possible to predict the future.

Well, to answer the first question, I think about the future. That's my job. That's all I do pretty much, day in, day out. I'm not always thinking 20, 30 years out. In fact, most of the time I'm thinking one, two, five, occasionally 10 years ahead. I'm currently working on a project looking at the future of public libraries 30 years ahead and that's actually fairly unusual.

There's no great skill to it. You don't need a degree in it, although you can get one if you really want one. It's just really having the time, reading a lot, talking to a lot of people, travelling as much as you can and particularly trying to see patterns and connections.

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In relation to the second question – “Can you predict the future?” – the answer is absolutely not. No, you can’t. As was said earlier, I’m a futurist, not a psychic. You can make vague predictions and inevitably they will become right because they’re so vague that if you just hang on long enough they become true.

The minute you start getting specific it goes horribly wrong and it’s practically impossible. Having said that, I think it is possible to see the broad outline of the future. I like to think of trends, for example, as waves. You can see the really big ones from a long way off. They quite often come in sets. One of the things about waves and trends is that the very big ones tend to produce rips, they produce undercurrents going off in a completely different direction.

If you take globalisation as a major, major trend, one of the very biggest trends, it’s spawning localisation. And that happens quite a lot with trends I think.

There’s also a great quote that’s in the book which was from another writer, a much better writer, William Gibson, who said that “The future is already here, it’s just unevenly distributed”. I think there’s something in that. Trends (and, I’d say, change) start with a single individual or a single event. It’s never government, it’s never large groups. It’s a single person, a single event. It happens generally on the edge of things and it moves inwards. It’s a bit like throwing a stone into a pond and the ripples going out, except it’s happening in the opposite direction. It starts on the fringe, on the edge, and it moves slowly into the mainstream, or these days maybe not so slowly.

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If you, for example, want to look at what people in Melbourne will be doing with mobile phones, what's a fourteen year old going to be doing with a mobile phone, in five years time, you can get a reasonable view of that by going to somewhere like Seoul or Tokyo right now because they're out on the edge, if you like, in terms of what's going on there. There you'll find people reading 80,000-word novels on mobile phones on the way to work. You will find people writing 80,000-word novels on mobile phone keypads. Allegedly you will see eight year olds pointing to things with their thumbs.

Now, some of that, in fact a lot of that, is very specific to those countries. It's to do with their history and their culture. In the case of Japan, for example, people travel very long distances to work. They have incredibly fast wireless connections. And culturally they're very fond of Manga Comics, which have a cell phone format or cell sized format – that's basically the same size as a mobile phone screen.

So that may not necessarily all happen here but it's possible. Obviously, the tricky thing is saying when rather than what.

Now let's do some pictures. I like pictures. I like messing around with colours and shapes. Every year I do a trend map. If you Google trend map you'll find this in a flash. I give virtually everything away.

This is this year's trend map [refers to image]. Last year's looked like the Shanghai subway. The year before that looked like the London Underground. This looks like an octopus. The general idea is that the really big trends are in the middle. So we've got global connectivity, which is

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spawning anxiety and volatility. We've got debt, ageing, the power shift eastwards, uncertainty, sustainability, digitalisation, climate change.

And then we've got things like technology flying off down here. We've got the home; we've got things like debt stress, affordable luxuries, single-person households, extended families, renting things, unplugging, gated communities, things like that.

We've also got the environment, and we've got politics, business. They're always somewhat different. I've been doing a lot of work in risk management, which sounds terribly boring but I think it's fabulous. What could happen that could make things go horribly wrong. This year I've put these little ghoully people here to represent possible risks – major internet failure, electricity shortages.

This, by the way, was done in December 2008. Up here you will see 'influenza pandemic'. Now, we don't have an influenza pandemic. If we did I wouldn't be here, I'd still be in Sydney. What we've got is an anxiety pandemic and it's because of this global connectivity and global media, and up to a point politicians and the precautionary principle.

Now, I'm not saying that it won't happen. That virus could mutate tomorrow and turn into something incredibly nasty. But at the moment it's just another example of how we quite like to invent things to be worried out.

For example, the key concern at the moment is the economy which means that the environment has been pushed to one side. As soon as the economy is fixed we're going to start worrying about the environment again.

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If you're interested in that trend map, Google it. It's not terribly serious. People take these things so seriously. So up here we've got as a global risk people taking trend maps too seriously. We've also got down here Nicole Kidman winning another Oscar, which clearly is not going to happen.

Woody Allen once said about the future that it's very much like the present only longer. I've got about 30 minutes because I want to save as much time as possible for questions. So for the sake of brevity I've boiled things down to four more maps, or four more bits of a map.

Pretty much the only serious thing I do actually is scenario planning, which is a way of looking at the future. I suppose the premise of scenario planning is that if you accept that the future is uncertain logically, surely there must be more than one future. I mean when people talk about futures a lot of people say, "The future's going to be like this." I would be very cynical about anybody who said, "The future's like this." The future is many different places, all of which could come true, all of which could be true at the same time depending on where you are and who you're talking to and so on and so forth.

So this is what they call the 'scenario matrix' in the lingo. I didn't do this by myself. I did this with a very good friend of mine called Oliver Freeman at the Neville Freeman Agency and another good friend of mine Wayde Bull at Principals, both in Sydney.

The size of the circle is supposed to denote how important things are. But you can't really see how the world is going to end up; there's no narrative, effectively. This thing has a bit of a narrative.

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Now what's going on here, you have a very simple axis. You have pessimism against optimism, and I'm talking about fundamentally two things, the economy and the environment, that's what's driving the pessimism or the optimism.

Then you have social activism or social passivism down here, getting involved, not giving a monkeys. You could actually have 'we' up there and 'me' down here.

We have four worlds. The first world I want to talk about is down bottom right which is 'Moreism'. I just saw an ad for this in Melbourne Airport. It said, "Do you want to spend five minutes stretching your legs or five minutes stretching your targets?" I don't know who it was for. I was running very fast trying not to be late. That's a very 'Moreist' sentiment. It's all about growth. It's the thought that enough is never quite enough. It's rampant consumerism, it's self-indulgence and it's 'basically I just want to get as much as I can out of life and to hell to everybody else and the consequences'. So you're either in complete denial about things or you just don't really care.

It's hedonistic, it's narcissistic, it's libertarian, it's highly materialistic, it's very disposable, it's vain, it's vacuous, it's Dubai! If you get *The Australian* you'll know they have the *Wish Magazine*. And there's an even better one with *The Financial Times* every month called *How to Spend It*. It's just extraordinary. It's the Crown Casino. It's Las Vegas. If you were being really unkind you might say Brisvegas which is unkind and untrue. But it's that sort of thing.

It's also a woman called Joyce Vincent. In the opening page of my book, which I wrote two and a half years ago, I was talking about this woman called Joyce Vincent. She was 40 years old and

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she was watching the TV one day in her flat with the heating on and she died. Nobody found her for two years. She had the TV on and the heating on. She had neighbours on both sides.

This is one of the sort of extraordinary consequences of the fact that the more globalised and connected we get the more isolated you can get. I don't know what the hell her neighbours were doing. I mean, presumably they were Twittering each other or talking about something or other. But nobody found her for a very, very long time. And that's a very sort of 'Moreist' world. And I think that's roughly where we've been for the past 10, maybe 15 years.

Companies love Moreism, by the way, so do banks. It's all about acquiring more stuff, getting more loans, getting bigger debt, getting a bigger house, all that kind of stuff.

It's all about bling. It's the David Jones black Am-Ex card. It's all of that kind of stuff.

Going back to the matrix, we have the Smart Planet at top right. This is quite an optimistic world, I guess, where people think that science and technology will solve virtually every single problem we've got. Interestingly IBM is now using the words "smarter planet" which is quite interesting. Companies like this world as well. It's very Apple, Nokia, Siemens and IBM, and anything online and *Wired Magazine*. The Toyota Prius is in this world.

People are fully aware of economic issues, particularly sustainability issues. But they're using technology to solve those problems. You're still living with very unregulated free market forces. It's robotics, it's internet, it's nanotechnology, it's biotechnology.

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Interestingly, in relation to communities, I think this is a world where communities exist primarily online. Communities have shifted. They used to be about physical spaces, and they still are to some extent. It was the village, it was the street, it was the town etc. That is still true but it is also now about somebody with a shared interest – the physical location is becoming less important.

But I see a problem with this. I think when communities primarily exist online, the communities are quite narrow. They are quite superficial and they are actually ultimately unfulfilling. Most people haven't twigged on to this yet, but I think we're beginning to see it. People are beginning to realise that it's not about how many friends you've got online, it's the quality of those friends. It's not about numbers, it's about quality.

There are books beginning to be written about this sort of thing, books like *How to be Free* by Tom Hodgkinson, which is all about living a simpler life. There's a very good book called *Enough* by John Nash. There's a book I saw last week called *The Power of Less* by Leo Babauta, again very much in this area of actually localising, the importance of the physical, the importance of quality and relationships. BP, Beyond Petroleum is a classic example. The CSIRO is kind of in this world a bit as well.

I now want to take a trip to Personal Fortress, which is down the bottom left-hand side. This is a deeply pessimistic world. People just think the world's absolutely screwed, that it's coming to an end probably, that there's nothing I or anybody else can do about it so I'm just going to go to the IGA, buy lots of baked beans and move to Hobart or something like that.

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What has happened in this world is that certain events have combined to create a country or a community that is incredibly scared and frightened. Climate change is worse than we expected, the economy is a mess, there's polarisation of wealth – there's tremendous social unrest. People are effectively turning their back on the outside world. Everything is localising.

This is a world of tight economic protectionism, very tight regulation, it's quite parochial. It's kind of at the extreme.

You've got to bear in mind that these worlds have moderate sides to them and extreme sides. The further you go out there the more extreme it gets. On the extreme end, you have oil at \$300 a barrel and Mad Max III is going on. On this side it's actually not too bad. It's a world where people actually look after each other. It's not the Joyce Vincent world.

The trouble, particularly at the extreme end, is that it can tip over into something incredibly nasty. It can tip into nationalism, xenophobia, racism, people blaming technology and immigration in particular for causing all of the problems. It's everything sort of closing things down. If you had that influenza pandemic being absolutely true, and say instead of 1700 people dying it was 170 million, that comes true in a flash. We could tip over into that world incredibly quickly.

Dick Smith is a great brand on one sense, but it can also be seen as quite sort of protectionist and nationalistic. In this world he'd probably set up the Dick Smith Diggers' Bank and everything would be localised. And that's a great thing on one level. But I think it can be quite

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insular. It's all about growing your own. There are some good sides to this but some really bad sides as well.

The final world, which is my favourite world, is 'Enoughism'. In this world, generally speaking, it's relatively pessimistic. The economy is not brilliant, the environment's not brilliant and so on. It's kind of an anti-materialist view of the world.

People are alarmed about the state of the planet and the economy and social equality and all that kind of stuff, and they've decided to try and do something about it. So it's very much a world where people have had enough. And it's also a world where a lot of people have got enough. They think, "I don't need a bigger house. I don't need three televisions."

It's very community driven. It's very ethically focused. It's about buying less stuff and looking after it – fixing things, mending things, swapping things. It's about switching things off. This is very Fair Trade, very Earth Hour. It's about trying to get a balance. It's about saying, "I'm going to turn the Blackberry off when I go on holiday," or, "I'm going to leave the office at 5.30." It's very connected to downshifting, sea change, tree change, all of that kind of stuff.

Family life is rediscovered and extended, whereas, for example, in Moreism it's completely fragmented. Resource shortages will be quite extreme in some cases in this world. That's going to localise manufacturing and consumption. It will be back to where it was 50 years ago – people working more locally because they're seeking that balance.

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Transport has become much more of a group activity. It's not about individually, necessarily, owning a car. You'd be sharing one, you'd be renting one, you'd be using public transport and so on.

Melbourne is actually beginning to look a bit like Copenhagen or Amsterdam. There are a lot of people cycling, there are a lot of people walking. The speed of life is actually a little bit slower.

People aren't throwing away mobile phones, unless it's right in the extreme. They're just saying, "I'm going to ration their use a little bit. I'm going to turn them off now and again. I'm going to unsubscribe from a few things. I'm going to unplug from a few things."

Twitter, for example, is not very big in Enoughism. It's huge in Smart Planet and it's fairly big in Moreism. Shopping in an Enoughist world, all of a sudden it's cool to spend as little as possible, that's the absolute antithesis of Moreism. Second hand is important, swaps, garage sales, all of that kind of stuff. Purchasing is less impulsive. People think before they spend. People get told, "No," quite a bit. It's about making your own things at home. It's about home baking, home brewing, making your own fun. It's renting rather than buying. It's about swapping. People will barter in this world.

This isn't about picking a winner. All four of these worlds are currently true in Melbourne. If you could find a house with four people in it, which could be a challenge, you would probably find four people in four rooms on four screens doing four different things at 5.30 at night. This is celebrated by the likes of BigPond and their "BigPond Homes" as though this is some kind of

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positive. I actually see that as a bit of a negative actually. I think they should all possibly do a bit more together.

So Dad might be Smart Planet, Mum's in Enoughism, the son's in Personal Fortress and the daughter's in Moreism, or vice versa. And this could all be true in the future. But it's not about picking a winner. It's about trying to work out roughly where are we now. As I say, I think we've been here for quite a long time.

Where, as a broad trend, are we going? I think we're sitting right there at the moment. These bleed into each other. That's why there's a dotted line. We're sitting on the fence here trying to work out what's going to go, what's going to happen.

I think, I'm sorry to say this, but if you want a prediction, I think this recession is going to be short and sharp. It's over in two years. We're straight back here. I think we have no memory. Fear is replaced by greed and we start the entire cycle again.

Now, if it's a bit longer, say it's sort of really nasty and it's sort of three or four years of very slow growth and all the rest of it, then there is a chance we will end up here, although realistically we'll get a mix. This will be blurry. If we have five to 10 years of the 1970s over again, so a lot of John Farnham probably, then we're here. And I think that's a really good thing.

The reality is, it's a question of which do you mix with which. We're not going to be in just one world completely. Some people right now are so Moreist it's unbelievable, while other people are living very much an Enoughist life.

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The other thing about Enoughism is that's where most individuals in Australia would quite like to be. But I think most corporates want to be in Moreism, or they're probably moving towards Smart Planet. So there's a bit of a battle happening potentially.

But all of what I've just said presupposes that we're at the mercy of the future. There are people like me trying to predict what's going to happen, but I think possibly all that I have just said is completely wrong. We are not at the mercy of the future. We can have the future any shape, colour and smell we want it. We can invent it.

Actually, the world would be a lot less anxious if collectively we could decide where we want to go and have a shared vision and we pursue that. The world would be a much better place and we could invent the future that we actually want to live in.

I'd like to finish with a couple of things. There was a quote I bumped into accidentally online recently by a US economist from Stanford called Paul Roma. He said a great thing quite recently which I thought was fabulous, which is that "A crisis is a terrible thing to waste". I think that's true. A lot of change happens when people have their backs up against the wall and people are beginning to review alternatives. And if everything all gets lovely again we'll just sort of forget and we won't change anything. So at the moment there is a bit of an opportunity to make a lot of noise and actually to try and change things.

The second thing I'm going to end on is just a bit of rampant publicity. My website is www.nowandnext.com. Please have a look. Virtually everything on there is free. There is a quarterly report on what I think is happening in the world, which is completely free. If you click

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on that little thing that says 2009 you can download quite a big report on what I think is happening over the next 12 to 18 months.

Please do not buy the book from the website. It's very expensive on the website. Go to Dymocks. It's much cheaper.

Thank you very much.

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