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## Futures at forty: A time to democratise and rejuvenate the FS enterprise

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*Futures* is a great journal. It is remarkable because of its plural, planetary, humanising, futuristic vision, because it seeks to build bridges across and to blur boundaries, because it has been around with its quiet but important presence for forty years, and because if ever we come close to creating a 'world brain' then *Futures* would in all likelihood have played some role in the process leading up to it.

It passes with flying colours the most important test to judge the importance of something – the 'if not' test: what would happen if the journal *Futures* did not exist? Well, it would be very badly needed indeed and we would have to create one! So during the tumultuous last four decades it has served an important function and played a tremendous role.

My association with *Futures* is less than a decade old, beginning in 2000 when I contributed a hard-hitting critique of popular futures studies (FS) discourse, in the form of nine propositions on the state of FS [1]. I then co-edited a special issue, *Impaling the Future* [2], that was based on the WFSF world conference of 2001 on the theme 'Many cultures, one world: local development and globalisation'. My association with *Futures* became much stronger when Zia Sardar asked me to join the editorial board in 2001 and subsequently, to become one of the consulting editors in 2003. However, I have had occasion to read a number of papers written prior to 2000. My comments on *Futures*, therefore, are about its overall character, contribution and role in all its years of existence, and not restricted only to the last decade.

I will first comment on what makes *Futures* such a salient and remarkable journal, before looking at issues that the journal needs to address in order to accomplish its own potential.

### 1. The salience of *Futures*

For all those concerned with the future of humanity, the planet and of human life, the stupendous vision and mandate of *Futures* is quite amazing: "*Futures*<sup>®</sup> is an international, refereed, multidisciplinary journal concerned with medium and long-term futures of cultures and societies, science and technology, economics and politics, environment and the planet and individuals and humanity. Covering methods and practices of futures studies, the journal seeks to examine possible and alternative futures of all human endeavours. *Futures*<sup>®</sup> seeks to promote divergent and pluralistic visions, ideas and opinions about the future."

True to this vision, the journal has carried papers on this whole range of subjects and futuristic concerns, often multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary in nature, written by people from diverse perspectives and discipline backgrounds, and promoting divergent ideas and visions about the future. This kind of openness and plurality of perspectives is rare in the world of knowledge.

Thanks to this approach, the journal has been able to significantly overcome the rigid and stultifying boundaries of academic disciplines. Additionally, this has helped the journal to address real, pragmatic and policy concerns, and reach out to policy-makers and practitioners, rather than being merely an academic journal. The energy crisis, environmental destruction, sustainable development, the consequences of globalisation, the future of specific countries and regions, war and peace, education for the future, democracy, governance, the economy, the impact of advanced technologies, religion and spirituality, all of these and more real-life concerns have been addressed by the contributions appearing in *Futures*. The discussions on epistemologies, new ways of knowing and methodologies to study the future have also been a significant part of the *Futures* discourse.

Equally remarkable, perhaps, is the fact that *Futures* has been able to sustain this discourse for forty years, and during these years the journal has managed to attract writers and contributors from different corners of the world. No doubt, the

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journal is published out of Europe and has a substantially larger percentage of English-speaking European–North American–Australian contributors. Nevertheless, the journal still has some kind of a ‘global’ character. It represents the participation of some of the best forward-looking minds in the world in a global discourse of knowledge driven by real-life concerns, and to this extent, is, along with other similar fora, part of an incipient ‘world brain’. This role played by the journal is especially important when contrasted with some of the other publications in the FS field. For instance, in a recent paper Rick Slaughter has noted the close-mindedness and the extremely narrow US-focussed concerns of the so-called ‘World Future Society’ [3].

Especially before the rise of the Internet, this role of *Futures* was very significant. In the Internet age of the last ten to fifteen years, the global knowledge discourse of *Futures* continues to be important, but has been overshadowed by the far easier dissemination and availability of limitless information and knowledge on the Internet.

Re-inventing its salience and rethinking its role in the Internet age is one of the foremost challenges that *Futures* faces at forty years of age. I turn, at this point, to the issues and concerns that the journal needs to address to be able to fully reach and accomplish its own potential, and to see how this potential can be enhanced in the new circumstances in the first decade of the 21st century.

## 2. A time to democratise and rejuvenate

Ironically, while *Futures* has made the brave effort to overcome disciplinary boundaries, and has been extremely futuristic and visionary in doing so, in another very fundamental aspect of its existence it continues to be operated on principles of exclusion and privilege, and in so doing has created artificial boundaries that are very traditional, rigid, uncharacteristic of the 21st century and can only hinder the enterprise of *Futures* and FS. I am referring to the access and commercial policies that disallow the participation of a huge number of potential readers and contributors in the *Futures* discourse.

A journal like *Futures* is bound to be ‘elitist’ by the very nature of its aspiration and the quality of its knowledge and discourse. But it cannot and should not be exclusionist for reasons other than quality of knowledge and the nature of the discourse. Unfortunately, however, because the journal is priced in a manner that it is accessible only to the institutions and individuals in the developed economies of the North, it completely excludes a huge potential readership and a vast pool of potential contributors from the less developed countries of the South. As if this is not bad enough, the journal persists with electronic access policies that refuse to see any opportunity provided by the Internet for wider public dissemination and discourse. Not only is electronic access too highly priced,<sup>1</sup> the rich material published in the journal is not made freely available even after years of publication! This goes against the very grain of wider, democratic, knowledge discourse on critical issues of public policy and concern.

This has critical consequences, which go against the very spirit and the prodigious vision of *Futures*. While the journal avowedly “seeks to promote divergent and pluralistic visions, ideas and opinions about the future,” how can it do so by excluding the majority of humanity from the enterprise? Since only the rich and privileged intellectuals and academics, located mostly in the universities and institutions of the North, can access the journal and its contents, it is only these sections which preponderantly contribute to the discourse. The others are excluded – de facto, although not de jure – from the discourse, and thus the aim of promoting divergent and pluralistic visions is self-defeated! The print version of the journal is so expensive that although the potential number of those interested and inclined to read is large, thanks to a global English-speaking, higher educated and futures- and global knowledge-oriented population of millions, only a handful of institutions or individuals in countries like India end up subscribing to or reading the journal. For instance, with over 130 universities and thousands of higher education and research institutions in India, the market for the journal and the pool of serious readers and potential contributors can be significant. But even in New Delhi there is hardly an important library where I could access past and current issues of the journal!

Partly as a result of this artificially imposed exclusivity, the value, reach and the impact of the FS discourse on the real world is sharply restricted. In my 2001 paper on the state of FS in *Futures*, I had noted that “*There is a huge gap between the insights and consciousness of the futurists, on the one hand, and the consciousness and actions of ordinary human beings as well as the more powerful decision-makers, on the other.* While future studies have been able to develop important perspectives on the human condition, there has been little success in spreading these perspectives beyond the rarified world of the academia. The variety of future studies that has reached the wider world is, as acknowledged by the futurists, the ‘pop’ variety, which is one-sided and poor in terms of alternative and critical perspectives” [1].

Is there a way out of this undesirable situation? It is clear that *Futures* has to learn to change with the times, to adopt newer principles and ways of working, both to continue to retain its relevance and to remain true to its own goals and spirit. It has to learn to use the Internet more creatively as a tool to enable access to the journal. Putting the full archives of the journal on the Internet for free public access could be a highly visible and effective manner of taking the *Futures* discourse to a much wider, educated, concerned global public. For recent issues the journal may decide to keep access restricted for commercial reasons, but could decide on a policy to make the contributions freely available after a certain time period. Alternately, it can have electronic access and pricing policies that are more in tune with the economic realities of the developing world.

<sup>1</sup> Electronic access to a single paper published in the journal, for instance, costs about US\$ 30, enough to purchase two or three substantial books in the Indian market. Or to purchase broadband internet access for a whole month.

With regard to the hard copy print version of the journal, for markets in the developing economies of the South, the journal needs to seriously consider and produce a low-priced edition, as is standard practice for many publishers and publications. With the economic rise of China, India and other erstwhile poorer countries, the interest in FS is only going to increase. This has created an opportunity to both market the journal in these countries, thus reaching a much wider readership, as well as to draw upon a huge pool of talented contributors, who can come up with new visions, ideas and opinions, thus enriching the discourse manifold. Although the value of this expanded focus goes far beyond a commercial and profit motive, the journal has to learn quickly from the new market mantra of exploring mass markets to discover the fortune at the bottom of the pyramid [4].

Indeed, the journal has taken a small step in this direction by appointing consulting editors from India and China in the last few years. However, this, by itself will not go far in the absence of the journal being easily available to the readership – and gradually becoming part of the intellectual public domain – in these countries. At present, thanks to efforts in the last few years (such as the special issue on Indian Futures that I produced on Zia's suggestion), there are a few contributors from India, South Asia and China, but the journal is hardly available to readers in these countries, since there are only a handful of subscribers. The same is very likely true for Africa and Latin America. Only if the journal is seen to be available in these countries, however, will it attract serious contributors. If this does happen, it may have another positive fallout. It may well help the journal improve the relatively poor citation record for the papers published in it, a problem noted by Bruce Tonn in his contribution to this issue.

The task of extending the journal's reach and market to non-western societies is crucial for another reason. At the beginning of the 21st century it is clear to many of us that the task of inter-cultural understanding and building bridges between religions is one of the most important tasks in the 21st century. This demands a balanced presence of voices and opinions from the East and the West, from the North and the South. If *Futures* has to play a role in this crucial task, it will have to become more truly a forum for global discourse, perhaps transforming from a still somewhat 'European' to a truly global journal.

Forty is an age to look back proudly at one's achievements so far, but also to assess one's shortcomings and mistakes, and to contemplate the next strides into the future. For *Futures*, it is an opportune time to come to terms with a world that has changed dramatically in the last four decades, and to refashion its own role in the new circumstances. The time is ripe for *Futures* to lead the way to truly democratise and globalise the discourse of FS, and, in doing so, prepare for its next big leap into the future.

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# Whatever happened to Teilhard de Chardin? A case for resurrection

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## 1. Teilhard: A futurist out of fashion

At first glance, the maverick Jesuit priest and palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) looks like a classic casualty of futures studies: the grand visionary of a future past, a man whose sense of tomorrow was too well grounded in the knowledge and hopes of his day. Already in 1965, Stephen Toulmin had judged Teilhard's *magnum opus*, *The Phenomenon of Man* [1], 'wish-fulfilment' ([2], pp. 113–126). Nevertheless, Teilhard figured prominently in the first decade of *Futures*: 26 of the 42 citations to his work can be found between 1969 and 1979. The 1980s and the 1990s each produced five citations, and so far this decade has produced six. A point of comparison is Lewis Mumford's citation history in this journal: 52 overall and distributed relatively equally across the decades, with only 15 in the first decade.

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