

FUTURE FORECAST: IGNORING HALF THE PICTURE YIELDS SURPRISINGLY POOR RESULTS



[Adapted: Magic 8-Ball by
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It's that time of year when we not only take a look backward, but a look forward to the future. Unfortunately in doing so, we rely heavily on so-called experts, whose vision suffers from two fundamental limitations:

- They're overwhelmingly male; their viewpoints are published more frequently than those of women;
- They depend frequently on male-dominated science and technology in constructing their forecasts, rather than looking at shifts in human conditions.

Once a upon a time in my career, I rubbed

shoulders with futurists, both in corporate visioning and in business intelligence. They made a few eye-opening predictions that I pooh-poohed at the time. In 1999 one futurist told me that fuel cell technology wouldn't be commercialized for more than 10 or 15 years. Another report circa 2000 predicted the U.S. would become a rogue nation because of its hegemonic power.

I laughed off both of those forecasts at the time. You'll note, however, none of our government's unilaterally killing drones use fuel cells as power sources.

In spite of the occasional spot-on prediction, many of the forecasts I've read or seen made as part of scenario planning have not come to pass. They remain years and decades away if they haven't already become impossible or irrelevant. Why are future outcomes so notoriously nebulous?

During the dozen-plus years since I first worked with futurists and participated in scenario planning sessions, I've wised up and learned a few things, key to understanding the lameness of most futurists' forecasts.

1) It's really difficult for most organizations to see outside their own self-constructed silos built on the expertise of their products and services. They hire and promote subject-matter experts and look to them for forecasts. Because of internal feedback loops, organizations become blind to barriers so that their members really can't see with specificity beyond 2-5 years. Asking folks in formal organizations to make forecasts about their own work, even with well-trained facilitators, is extremely difficult. Barriers within their own organizations may be invisible to them as well, ex. internal politics, or other activities deliberately hidden from view.

2) Organizations are often blind to their own social capital. If members within groups are uniformly unchallenged by barriers within and without their business lives, they may not see

bumps in the road that thwart everybody else outside their group.

3) Outsiders who speculate on future activities of organizations while relying on publicly available information from within these groups may suffer from the same siloed and blinkered vision.

4) Predictions tend to follow the quantifiable, where the money as well as expectation exist—in science and technology. Unfortunately, scientists are loathe to make guarantees; they give percentages and odds, but not absolute assurances. Forecasts are only as good as the current understanding of science and technology, within some margin of error. Futurists often round up, encouraging excessive optimism.

These factors may explain why futurists' predictions may ignore realities that grip nearly half of the humans on earth, while rendering so many of their forecasts inert.

Even factoring in the biases that shape forecasts, the future imagined can be far too tidy, . The gritty truths of the human condition and all its volatility are too neatly removed, parceled off outside the field of speculation.

As I type this, the passing of a female Indian gang rape victim is mourned and her country's "woman problem" is noted. This is not a little thing; we're talking about a lynchpin event affecting the political opinions within and without of the second most populous countries on earth—a country with 3.84 times the population of the U.S. In fact, at approximately 581,000,000 women, the total number of female residents of India outnumbers the entire population of the U.S. regardless of gender.

The "woman problem" India experiences isn't limited to that country. Women are treated consistently and persistently as second-class citizens in a majority of countries, including the U.S., their rights to equity in education, health care, autonomy routinely undermined, and their representation inadequate. See the U.N.

report, *The World's Women 2010: Trends and Statistics*[PDF] for specifics; here are a few:

- 74% of the world's illiterates are women; 54% of the 72 million primary school-aged children not in school are girls;
- A gender pay gap persists globally, to the detriment of women;
- On average, women hold only 17 percent of seats in national parliaments as well as 17 percent of government minister positions. Of 150 elected heads of state, only seven are women; of 192 heads of government, only 11 are women. Only 13 of the 500 largest corporations in the world have a female chief executive officer;
- Violence against women is still deeply embedded as a norm in many cultures; in some parts of the world, women as well as men may yet believe being beaten by male family members is acceptable.

There are 3.51 women of 7.06 billion total humans on this planet, most of whom are ignored or denied in far too many forecasts of a future that cannot exist without them.

If this is the reality from which our common future starts—a reality in which nearly half of humanity is denied in so many ways—how can any

prediction made by predominantly male futurists
be accurate?

If we were to ask a substantive number of
representatives from within that 3.51 billion
humans, what would they forecast about our
collective human future?