

Reframing the Future

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Abstract

*How can futurists use reframing to get through to their clients? New ideas cannot easily take hold in people's minds without replacing or changing the ideas already there. That means futurists face a challenge in trying to get new ideas through to people. The challenge is to understand the narratives, the biases, the hopes and the fears-and to construct new narratives and framings that can take hold. George Lakoff, in *The Political Mind*, explains framing and its centrality. Drawing on his insights and our work with clients, we take a fresh look at what framing and reframing mean to the work futurists do for business, government, and non-profits.*

Reframing the Future

"Saving civilization as we know it." Captain Kirk, *Star Trek*

George Lakoff argues in *The Political Mind* (2008) that we live by narratives, by stories, some of them complex, most of them simple. The simplest and the smallest are called "frames" or "scripts." Lakoff, a cognitive linguist at UC Berkeley, says we use these to think, and to organize our lives and our decisions. The narratives connect to what is in our worldviews, and evoke our subconscious reactions. They are meaningful because of the emotional connections they make in our brains.

Many of the narratives are similar, and similar across cultures, even though the stories told in different cultures may identify different heroes, roles, and events. Underneath these differences, it is the same story. For example, a man going into a hospital as a patient has a specific role to play and a story line to follow as do the doctors, nurses, and others he encounters there. He arrives with a sense of ways the story might unfold, and how he expects or hopes it will turn out. The general story—a hospital visit—is familiar to him, and helps him cope with what he experiences there.

Entertainment uses familiar stories to attract and gain our attention and satisfy our desires, often, for perfect endings. Other aspects of life may play out stories with endings that are less perfect or satisfying. In politics, as Lakoff argues, campaigners and politicians have learned how to evoke "frames" and stories that activate an emotional response in voters' minds. This has proved more powerful in electing candidates than appeals to reason, rationality, perceived self-interest, logic, the value of particular policies, or the greater good.

This is a simplified view of Lakoff's argument. The lesson we want futurists to learn from this is that we may too often take the wrong path in our presentation of the future to the public. Many, if not most, futurists value reason, rationality, the use of logic and careful analysis to uncover what forces and changes are shaping the future. We recognize that people need to, and should, know more about changes that they probably face. However, the study of the future tends towards an abstract discussion that is less than compelling. "The future" or even "alternative futures" have broad implications for people and organizations in the present. How do we help people fully understand and consider those implications and take them into account in their decisions?

In our work as futurists we find that although people are often fascinated by the idea of exploring the future, the concepts involved do not easily become part of their thinking. Futurist Jay Forrest (2008) recognizes the problem, "I specifically strive to work within my clients' heads to build awareness and ability to see and consider issues outside their heads."

Perhaps his clients, and, to a greater degree as Lakoff would add, "the public," do not have the "substantial neural structures" needed to understand and comprehend the broad view of what is happening on the road to the future. For the most part, nobody does.

What's worse, Lakoff says that many things get between people and their comprehension of everything that is going on. Stress, for example, caused by daily worries, can affect people's ability to grasp broad conceptual arguments. There are two aspects futurists should be aware of in that warning. One is that most clients futurists serve call them in because they are already worried about the future. The large, mature organization that has an aging business model and upstart competitors, is an example. So also is the organization facing economic conditions and challenges never seen before. The second is a more general fear of the future. Today this is made worse by economic conditions that seem beyond most people's control.

Taking the Wrong Path

If we are to believe Lakoff, then we, and many other futurists, have been taking the wrong path in communicating about the future. We hear that our clients like data, so we base our discussion of the future on the extrapolation of trends for which we have data. We are told we must have a sound (i.e. logical, rational) basis for our deductions about the future. So we deliver empirical data and analytical conclusions. We expect our rational analysis to convince people about what we are saying. It doesn't always work.

But, as Lakoff would tell us, we don't need a better rational argument for the benefits of thinking about the future. We need a better story.

A Better Story

The story has to be one that our clients' unconscious minds will hear, adopt, and shape to fit their own situation and experiences. If the story we tell does not connect to them emotionally, as well as intellectually, it will not be effective in helping them understand their future.

When we say story, we assume there are many "stories" that can be told about the future, or "framed" as ideas that people add stories to in their own heads. We also know that people have different internal and unconscious frames for their own lives that will affect which stories they react to and connect with.

A better story—one that fits an individual's conscious and subconscious, will be more effective in bringing new insights and understanding. It will then give us more leverage when we need to shift expectations, overcome biases and conventional ways of thinking.

Scenarios—Are They the Stories That We Need?

At this point, the reading futurist will be yelling, "We do stories! What about scenarios?" We argue that scenarios, as stories, are probably the one slender reed that futurists have extended to their uncomprehending public as a way of understanding the future. It is undoubtedly the reason why scenarios continue to be popular as a method of thinking about the future.

Futurists must rethink scenarios as a process and a tool, and discover ways to use them much more effectively as powerful stories that can motivate reshaping the future. Scenarios grown directly out of a rational analysis, such as with the approach outlined by Peter Schwartz in *Art of the Long View*, (1991) may not be the stories most able to bring people insights. As an analytical futures tool, the scenario method is superb, but it does not necessarily create the most effective narratives for bringing non-futurists new insights on the future.

In our evolving thinking on the power of the narrative in futures work, we have benefited from pioneering work by a number of thinkers. Psychologist Ken Wilber's work on integral thinking, especially as developed for futurists by Richard Slaughter (2001), has shown us the importance of looking more deeply into human behavior, motivation, and culture to understand future possibilities. It also showed us how communicating about the future has to accommodate people's deeper emotions.

Sohail Inayatullah's (1998) work on Causal Layered Analysis has shown futurists how to look beneath the surface of what he calls the "litany"—the quantitative trends that are routinely reported and projected in futures trend analysis. Under that surface are layers of deeper meaning and insight, including the worldviews, metaphors, and myths that shape how people act and respond to change. His insights are powerful not just for futures research and analysis, but also for understanding better how to get people to confront new ideas about their futures.

Framing Means Reframing

Furthermore, there is a larger task of exploring how to "reframe" the future so that when the public, and our clients, think about it, there are effective, emotionally-based, stories and ideas that they can use to internalize and exercise their thinking on.

The notion of reframing recognizes that those stories already lodged in people's subconscious are powerful, and that we need to have equally powerful new stories to gain people's attention. To move people to new thinking, we need to supply new stories—ones that are compelling enough and make strong enough connections to people's worldviews, that they succeed against the frames and stories that people already have. For example, a lot of people see living a more sustainable lifestyle as meaning hardship and sacrifice. Leading Futurists developed a story about "low-carbon hedonists" to show how the green life could be the good life.

That kind of reframing recognizes existing frames and narratives. Rather than use data to argue, reframing offers a story, in this case, a story that says, "It doesn't have to be unpleasant. You have the power to make it fun!" The central role of reframing is that it:

- Convinces people in ways other than logical argument
- Changes the dominant paradigm, e.g. reverses, or replaces it
- Counteracts a dominant idea, or an effective but dystopic framing
- Gets our thinking un-stuck from the stories we previously believed were unchangeable

In addition, reframing can help us:

- Simplify for better understanding
- Connect ideas that were previously separate
- Extend people's views by opening up questions about our role in the stories
- Supply emotional meaning
- Enable better communication of new information/ideas through connection with what is already in the unconscious mind
- Get past biases, or at least help us recognize them
- Create a consensus—this is untested but may be more possible

Futurists aren't necessarily the best, or even the only, tellers of stories about the future. What are our particular gifts, if any?

- We extend the story beyond today's structures and by doing so argue a reason to reframe: new thinking is required to get somewhere new.
- Our approach can get people to look at their current frames and stories to share and compare them. This should be a step in freeing up the thinking for new framing.
- Because we understand the swirl of forces at play in complex systems better than the average person, we can validate new stories and frames. An expert in another area may frame well within his/her sector, less well in the broad future.
- We are able to supply stories (scenarios) to go with the new framing. This puts it in a more understandable and believable form for people. The reframing then is consistent and valid with the shape of change that is emerging.

On the other hand, as futurists we may not be as good as we'd like to be in working in that emotion-focused mode. We tend to be happier in the analytical mode. Robert M. Pirsig, in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974) argues that in higher and professional education greater attention and value are given to what he calls the classical (rational and analytical) mode of thinking over the "romantic" mode—with its focus on holistic experiences, emotion and meaning. It is also probably difficult to forsake what he calls the more rational mode entirely and still be respected in the business and organizational world. We advocate for adding a much-strengthened story telling approach to our toolkits, not replacing our futures tools.

Futurists' Fear of Bias

We know that a lot of emotional campaigning for a certain vision of the future goes on. The religious, the agenda-based, and the political communities, to cite a few, compete for the public's mind in their framing of the future. For example, think of the various Doomsday scenarios, including the idea that in the Mayan calendar, 2012 means the end of the world. We also hear about global climate change framed as a complete alteration of our existence on the planet. Movies and books "frame" future stories in dystopian to utopian narratives. We also have to take into account existing beliefs that it is somehow dangerous to look to the future.

Futurists try to avoid their own biases in presenting their work to others. Is this getting in the way? Shouldn't we also "campaign" for the future by using language and framing that speak to the emotional and the unconscious? What is already in people's minds is powerful. New messages need to be powerful too.

How Can We Tell Our Communication Is Effective?

It seems clear that while people still believe the analytical approach must be the soundest even if it doesn't grab their attention, there is a sense of something missing. The gee whiz future is not enough of a future. People want to understand, or need to understand, the human side, "Where am I in this story?" Ultimately, the goal of reframing the future is to engage the emotions in the service of better understanding future events and changes. We accommodate the analytical in order to be taken seriously enough to be able to tell the human story.

In the past few years in Leading Futurists' work with clients, we have moved more into making the story central to communicating about the future. That has included using such concepts as "Lo-Carbon Hedonists," "The Aging Dividend," "Snarking the Techno," and "Overconnected."

We created each of these stories to confront, and perhaps replace what people already suppose about the future: Low-Carbon Hedonists says that sustainable living can be fun, and even luxurious. The Aging Dividend casts the aging population as positive, an asset to society. Snarking the techno shows people putting over-abundant technology in its place—battling back against its intrusiveness, with a sense of humor. Overconnected shows people, of their own volition, overly swept up in connectedness. In each of those stories, a people-focus and stories bring to light future ideas that

move past what we're seeing today, reframe what it might be like to live in these new societies.

Other futurists are innovating in giving people more evocative experiences to help them comprehend the future. This in effect, can put new stories in their minds, much the way futurists use the scenario method interactively, to get more people to create and internalize new thinking about the future. Stuart Candy¹ and Jake Dunagan² have worked extensively on "experiential futures" to give people more evocative, realistic experiences about future possibilities. They, in effect, bring scenarios alive for people through simulations and other experiences. They also create "artifacts from the future" through illustrations, mock-up signs and news stories.

Conclusion

In working to be as effective as possible, futurists will benefit from learning how to use stories and to frame and reframe experiences and ideas so that they can be heard, seen, and understood emotionally. In doing this, we must fight our pride in our rational, analytical skills. Our imaginative skills can get us to new successes with clients and the public if we work with them as well.

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Notes

1. Stuart Candy blogs at futuryst.com as "the Sceptical Futuryst". He is a researcher at the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies, and research fellow of The Long Now Foundation. Jake Dunagan joined the Institute for the Future as Director, Technology Horizons Program, in 2008, www.iftf.org.
2. Jake Dunagan joined the Institute for the Future as Director, Technology Horizons Program, in 2008, www.iftf.org.

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