

Open Foresight

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Introduction

There's a new global narrative emerging in the way we fundamentally understand ourselves as humanity – how we do business, how we learn, how we generate value together, how we interact. This transformation is being driven both by new communication technologies and by the emergent behaviors these tools enable. The context for our relationships is shifting and we still don't know exactly what that means for us as a species. We're asking ourselves questions like:

What happens when social networks connect us on a global scale?

How do new social and virtual currencies challenge our ideas about what money is and how value can be created and exchanged?

How can we form globally distributed enterprises and collaborative teams?

What do these emerging business models look like?

How do we build knowledge together and become more effective learners?

How are our notions of democracy and governance evolving?

What role do social technologies play in the evolution of human consciousness?

These are all challenging questions, and we don't know yet have the solutions.

That may sound terrifying and disruptive, or like an incredible opportunity to shape and bring about the future we deserve. Or, most likely, a bit of both.

Navigating Uncertainty

So, where do we begin? How do we learn to embrace change instead of fear it? How do we grab hold of the reins and/to direct where things go next and choose to engage the future, instead of being a victim to it?

These were questions we asked ourselves, creating our Future of Facebook project (described below),¹ in late 2010. Clearly, we need tools that help us better understand future possibilities so that we may make more informed decisions today. The field of Futures Studies, or Strategic Foresight,² has already developed many such tools, but they are still not commonly utilized by the general public.

So to help elevate and freshen up the ‘futures thinking’ meme, we decided to develop a process for analyzing complex issues in an open and collaborative way, and to raise the bar on public discourse and forward-focused critical thinking. It’s infused with methods from our respective backgrounds in media production, design thinking and visual communication. We’re calling the process Open Foresight (OF), and it aims to serve as an updated model for harvesting collective insight, generating scenarios, and creating strategic and digestible roadmaps into the future.

Our vision is to see a grand display of public imagination and participation as we collectively design towards the kinds of futures we desire. As big data is to narrow science, open foresight is a way to expand the number of actors, the amount of data, and the quality of output generated for forward-focused decision making.

Why Open Foresight Now?

In an increasingly complex time of uncertainty and accelerating change, where so many of our established institutions and infrastructures are crumbling, we have a window of opportunity to build a world that works better for all of humanity.

We’ve never been as connected as a species as we are today, with the ability to share our perspectives, beliefs, and direct experience almost instantaneously via the web. As the silos around our minds are torn down, we discover that we are not so different, and it is possible to find common ground and shared vision.

Over 30 years ago, Alvin Toffler and Clem Bezold foresaw this development, coined the term ‘anticipatory democracy’ and defined it as “an approach to problem solving that combines future consciousness with broad-based public participation.” Now, we can actually see how it might work.

By harnessing the power of media and storytelling with the speed of transmitting ideas through our networks online, we can quickly inspire our global mind with visions so strong that we are left with no choice but to act. We can now empower and mobilize ourselves on a scale never before possible, and marvel as we become both creators and witnesses of history.

In addition, it’s also a way to popularize the field of futures studies in general, and to create fun and easy pathways for people to learn to think more critically and long-term about decisions, their impacts, and ultimately the kinds of worlds we want to create.

Open Foresight - Brief History

The term Open Foresight was independently coined by Daheim and Uerz

(2006) for a model of the future of corporate foresight, and by Brigis, Miemis and Smart (2010) as a model of collaborative web-based foresight initiatives. Both of our groups were inspired by the “Open Innovation” concept of Chesbrough (2003), which champions using strategies and platforms to bring internal and external ideas and actors into the firm’s innovation and value generation efforts, and to incorporate lead users (von Hippel, 1988) and their networks in product development and the search for the best business model for commercializing products and services that users want. Today, Spigit.com is one of the leading examples of companies offering network-centric platforms and approaches to open innovation.

Open Foresight - Definition

While open foresight is still an evolving methodology, we’ve experimented enough to propose a working definition. We presently see three requirements to OF, and several additional features that are often desirable, but not critical to the definition. First the necessary elements:

1. Collective and Participatory Structure. Good OF starts by being collective, a process that sincerely attempts to capture the wisdom of the group. It must also be participatory, ensuring all the individual members get a lot of participation time, communicating, rendering opinions, finding commonality and areas of difference. There are a wide variety of processes and rulesets available for collective input and evaluation. Think of nominal group technique, unconferences, and open space time, all increasingly popular features of today’s more participatory conferences. Traditional corporate foresight (CF) projects have typically been focused around small groups and experts, as is demonstrated by the Delphi method. Now, our networks are breaking down those silos, and we’re finding a variety of rulesets that work well to engage user groups and the public in various contexts. CF can turn into OF. Wisdom of the group turns into wisdom of the crowd.

For the OF video projects we’ve completed so far, a hybrid approach was taken to tap the wisdom of crowds: we reached out to a range of respected domain experts and thought leaders, and also invited participation from the general public via social media channels - blogs, Twitter, Facebook and the Q&A website Quora. This gave us a diversity of opinion and perspectives that made alternative futures storylines robust.

2. Open Access, Online, and Input-Diverse. Next, modern OF must be truly open (accessible to everyone at some level of participation, if they so choose), it must have an online component (which, while it imposes access barriers for some, vastly reduces participation barriers for many), and it must exhibit and seek out a diversity of thought, background, method, and context its inputs. In the virtual space, we’re able to tap into fast and growing networks, multiple stakeholders, and a broadly diverse populace, who are all increasingly online.

3. Incentives to Participate. In modern OF, the process must also be designed with clear incentives to participate. The various ways that users might get value (creating something meaningful, freedom, reputation, options, economic opportunities, etc.) from participating in the project must to be clearly

stated, to maximize likelihood of participation. Obvious disincentives also need to be removed. There should be considerations for protecting anonymity when participation could provoke social or political penalties. The user interface must be understandable..

Utilizing gamification techniques to encourage users to engage in desired behaviors may also become increasingly common in best-in-class OF. Examples might be to implement a leaderboard, and reward participants points, badges, or a virtual currency, giving them public recognition for their efforts and incentive to continue to play. Mini games or challenges between participants are another way to up the engagement levels while encouraging the generation of more content. These techniques appeal to human drivers like curiosity, social reputation, and the pursuit of mastery. Combining these incentives with the process of story and scenario development may prove to be a powerful mechanism for unleashing collaborative creativity and imagination, as future-building becomes an art form as much as a strategic process.

In addition to these required features, here's a partial list of others that can help a lot, but aren't critical:

1. Promotion. Ideally, the OF initiative will be widely promoted to the appropriate community network hubs to maximize use. Fortunately, the smarter the web gets, the easier it is for users to find OF projects.

2. Transparency. Open access to the methods and goals of the OF process by participants is desirable, but in practice, internal strategy or intellectual property may limit this to some degree.

3. Diverse Output. A diversity of outputs, with correlation to the diversity of inputs, is often desirable in open foresight, to map the range of scenarios, "Schools of Thought" or other ideas of the crowd.

4. Iteration. Committing to a multistep collaborative process, or even an open-ended one like Wikipedia, will increase incentives to participate and keep the material current and relevant.

5. Multiplatform. Being available across devices, from desktop to mobile, maximizes online user access.

6. Elegance. Curated, careful user interface and design is a powerful way lower cognitive barriers to use.

Pilot Project: The Future of Facebook

We chose The Future of Facebook as our pilot project to employ this framework due to the company's social significance, global penetration and unpredictable nature.³ As a corporation, Facebook faces many challenges – from competition to government regulation. At the same time the implications for the users themselves goes far beyond Facebook. Our goal was to dig into those, and lay out a range of visions that the public can easily digest.

Does Facebook become a prime monitoring tool for governments and a goldmine for advertisers? Does it become a place for entrepreneurial activity to occur and companies to form? Do Facebook Credits evolve to be the world's first global currency, enabling the emergence of a "Facebook Economy"? Do users decide it doesn't provide them enough value, and migrate to the new 'next big thing'

platform?

Using the STEEP forecasting methodology, we viewed the challenges and opportunities for this company through the lenses of Society, Technology, Environment, Economics, and Politics. Each of these five categories became a short focus video that fleshed out that topic area. The final video was a big picture overview of the potential pathways for the evolution of Facebook.

To launch the public arm of the project, we posted the same 15 questions we asked all interviewees onto Quora. We monitored the topic for the most insightful and provocative answers, and highlighted those in blog posts we released over the course of the project. We encouraged the public to add their visions to “The Future of Facebook Project” topic on Quora.⁴

All the content we created for the Open Foresight project was licensed “Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 3.0” (cc by-SA 3.0), meaning we made it available to be reused, remixed, and built upon by others.⁵ Snippets of interview clips were uploaded to youtube with the creative commons license, enabling anyone to use the content to form their own vision videos.

We also built a Facebook page, aptly named “Future of this Social Network”, as a social media channel to keep the public updated on developments, video releases, and as a place to host conversations.⁶ We used the hashtag #fofb on Twitter to accompany similar updates and notifications.

Fueled By Crowdfunding & Corporate Patronage

Though not a requirement for an open foresight project, we decided to rely upon crowdfunding on Kickstarter,⁷ as well as patronage from businesses and corporations to support our work and the creation of publicly available content intended to educate and inform.

During the Renaissance, patrons directly supported the work of artists, designers and thinkers whose contributions were made for the public good and the enhancement of culture. In that same spirit, we wanted to put out a call for an updated version of Corporate Patronage.

Instead of dollars going towards marketing for marketing’s sake, we want to see brands partnering with visionaries and change agents who are expanding our notions of what is possible, and supporting the many experiments and projects that are testing new modes of operating.

To that end, we were very grateful for our first Corporate Patrons, Innotribe and the Innovation team at SWIFT, for supporting our project, and the further development of Open Foresight methods.⁸

Accelerating the Tipping Point

Our intention is for the Future of Facebook project to be the first of many upcoming foresight projects that teach us to better harness our collective intelligence to understand complex issues in a way that’s open, collaborative, and fun. At the same time, there’s also a deeper sense of urgency and necessity to propagating the OF meme.

It’s no accident that social change and transformation in communication is happening just as technology is accelerating. The two forces are symbiotically related. The picture emerging is that as we approach a global tipping point in

technology diffusion, we are also approaching a tipping point in the way we think.

By getting better at sharing information and developing more robust mental models, we are fueling ongoing technology growth and at the same time giving ourselves the best chance to navigate this increasingly complex and messy environment. We are at the source of the acceleration. And now we need to upgrade our tools if we are to keep pace.

Open Foresight is one of the many emerging processes that allows us to systematically “level up” our collective intelligence and forecasting ability. By combining available data, opinions from the experts, and the conventional wisdom of the crowds, we can analyze a topic from a wide range of perspectives and viewpoints. That information gets synthesized into a series of animation-rich videos that summarize these insights. The methodologies used will help us all gain a better understanding of the risks, opportunities, and implications surrounding the issues important to us. The hope is that we learn to come to clarity quickly, and then use wisdom and discernment in the choices that will impact generations to come.

Everyone is welcome to join the party... Whether we realize it or not, we’re all futurists now.

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Notes

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