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A Constellation of Possible Futures

The Civil Society
Foresight Observatory
Discovery Report

Now is a good time to think about how we think about the future.

A Constellation of Possible Futures brings together the findings from the Discovery Phase of the Civil Society Foresight Observatory project, which ran from 15 June to 29 July 2021. The Discovery Phase comprised a literature review and fact-finding workshops with stakeholders.

About Careful Industries

Careful Industries is a research organisation based in the UK. Through research and prototyping, we help our clients understand the social impacts of technologies and create new futures. Our sister organisation, Promising Trouble, is a not-for-profit, exploring the potential of community technologies. Visit <http://careful.industries> to learn more or contact us at hello@careful.industries.

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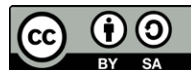


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Introduction

Now is a good time to think about how we think about the future.

Very often, the people who tell the most listened-to stories about the future — the people who set the tone and the parameters for others' expectations — are the ones with the most traditional power. Some are billionaires sending rockets into space; others are consultants or shareholders or politicians — the kind of people who write influential reports or give after-dinner speeches, move markets or make legislation.

But in the last eighteen months, shared social reality has changed, and it has become clear that both the market and the state are limited in the control they can exert upon either the present or the future. In 2021, making personal plans for three or six months' time requires the kind of faith and forecasting that used to be reserved for dreaming about 2030 or beyond. Uncertainty has become a certain fixture, and the pandemic has brought to the fore social tensions and disadvantages that many would have been unable to imagine in December 2019. It has also redistributed responsibilities, blurred the definition of what is meant by "home life", and "created an expanded space for political and economic discourse".¹ New tools and methods for showing what can and will come next have never been more urgent.

The Civil Society Foresight Observatory is an experiment to develop a foresight commons. Showing and sharing futures that are rooted in communities not board rooms, and bringing them to life in accessible ways that can be used and reused by funders, policy makers and civil society organisations.

At the heart of our project is a methodology we have named "relational foresight" that aims to be a more dynamic, pluralistic way of showing competing and complementary realities. This report explains the research that has informed that methodology, where our work fits in the wider landscape, and sets out how we plan to test it in the coming months.

Rachel Coldicutt, Anna Williams, Dominique Barron
August 2021

About the Civil Society Foresight Observatory

1

The Civil Society Foresight Observatory has been seed-funded by The National Lottery Community Fund to:

- Show the process through which foresight practice can be combined with lived, learnt, and practice expertise²
- Test the feasibility of a shared Foresight Commons for civil society
- Understand how the Foresight Commons can become new infrastructure for civil society, funded by a network of funders

Our aim is to make visible some of the possible, plausible, and just futures

that rarely surface in more traditional, top-down foresight, and make it easier for infrastructure communities, civil society, funders, and policymakers **to actively shape and nurture alternatives** through strategic interventions.

Careful Industries' job in this initial six-month period is to prototype and test the Observatory and show what could be possible in a larger, collaborative programme of work. We are also publishing our findings throughout the project, building a shared resource so that others can use the tools and methods we develop along the way.

1.1 Working hypothesis

The working hypothesis is that the Observatory will gather weak signals from across civil society to create a Foresight Commons, bringing to life civil-society foresight and creating a shared evidence base that helps:

- Funders fund different futures
- Civil society organisations anticipate and adapt more quickly

The Foresight Commons will be a resource that can be drawn on to support more diverse and anticipatory funding decisions that back emergent work, influence policymakers, and showcase the expertise of the breadth of civil society in long-term thinking and planning.

1.2 Relational foresight

Through Discovery, we have been researching what needs to be in place to make this happen. Our conclusion is that a Civil Society Foresight Commons **requires a relational way of doing foresight**.³ This is based on what Donna Haraway calls a collective “response-ability”⁴ for our world and our futures⁵, and our ambition is to demonstrate the continuous co-existence and interconnection of multiple realities for different communities.

Our starting point is to show the connections and differences between the kind of “top-down” foresight typically produced by powerful bodies such as governments and big business and the continuous, emergent sensing that takes place in civil society. As we found in the Glimmers Project⁶, there is an abundance of empirical and qualitative knowledge in civil society that is rarely shared outside of its immediate context;⁷ we want to make some of this knowledge more visible and accessible, and show some of the different facets of complex problems.

For instance, the recent McKinsey paper “The next normal arrives: Trends that will define 2021 — and beyond” is an attempt to aggregate the near-future

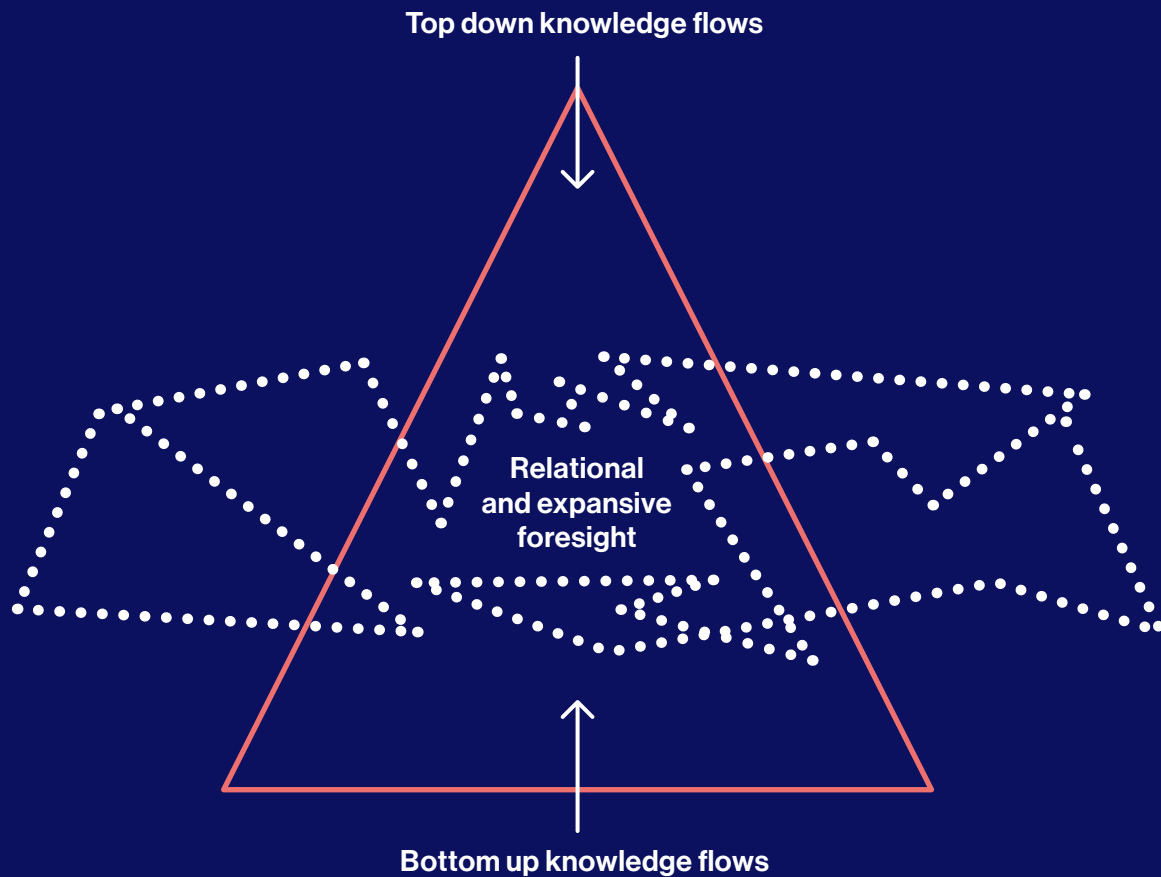
trends that matter to global business: working from home is described as a productivity booster; the pandemic a spur to innovation; and the speed of crisis response finally makes the elusive Fourth Industrial Revolution a tantalising possibility. Covid-19 is depicted as a large-scale disruptor that has allowed businesses to put rapid system development first, and the emphasis is on maintaining that momentum while getting ahead of the substantial growth opportunities provided by going green. It is a largely dispassionate view of a world in which business growth is the ultimate driver.⁸

Our ambition is to demonstrate the continuous co-existence and interconnection of multiple realities for different communities.

But how might the same scenarios look from the perspective of the workers powering supply chains in the context of climate hostility or delivering more productivity from the kitchen table? What might the aggregate picture look like if it considered the unpaid care work that happens in families and communities, the impact of Long Covid, or the context of global grief? The aim of relational foresight is to show how some of these futures coexist, impact and affect one another and capture some of the texture of “a world where many worlds fit”.⁹

By working with civil society rather than directly with groups of citizens, our aim is to capture the early signs of systemic changes as they become audible to those who choose to listen.

This is intentionally different from participatory foresight practices that are more commonly deployed to work through shared social divisions and dilemmas,



Relational Foresight

and which we discuss in more detail in Section 4. While this type of “bottom-up” public participation can be a democratic good, it is not always optimised to capture disparate weak signals. Multiple possible futures could be unfolding within any mini-public, but the emphasis on collaboration and consensus around clearly emerging and existing dilemmas is often a higher priority than capturing these shared and unfolding points of difference.

This kind of “bottom-up” participatory practice also needs “official” permission to happen: mini-publics are often convened to deliberate on issues that can be observed or anticipated by those with traditional power, and so there is a limit to the possibility of opening up opportunities for alternative futures to arise. Rather than shaping “unofficial futures” to fit within the boundaries set by the perspectives and rhetoric of these dominant narratives, relational foresight pushes us to engage the space between

“official” and “unofficial” futures and to expand the parameters of our considerations.

1.3 Values

To understand how to make this relational practice a possibility, we have reviewed existing foresight practices. Our initial hypothesis is that the creation and maintenance of a relational Foresight Commons depends upon:

- Ensuring foresight from all sources has equal status
- Establishing an alternative to “official” and “unofficial” foresight practices that allows for collective problem making.

“A world where many worlds fit.”

- Creating a new space for relational foresight that draws on the differences or convergences between official and unofficial futures.
- Being useful and intelligible to both funders and to wider civil society

As Elinor Ostrom showed, the longevity of any Commons depends on clear terms of common agreement, and throughout the pilot we will iterate and build on this set of values.

What we're going to do

2

For our pilot, we will recruit a group of Civil Society Observers.

The Observers will be drawn from a range of backgrounds: some will be experienced foresight practitioners, others will bring a mixture of lived, learnt and practice knowledge and experience. The Observers will be guided through an iterative process and the foresight they share will be mapped and developed to show possible leverage and intervention points for funders and civil society organisations. This will form the basis of the Foresight Commons, and show a set of possible, plausible, just futures that could be nurtured into being through coordinated, strategic interventions from funders and civil society.

We will:

- Summarise and share the findings of a few influential future narratives created by governments and consultancies
- Map these futures and work with our Observers with foresight experience to extrapolate them into possible worlds, and show their combined and aggregate impact (lightweight)
- Through interviews and workshops, ask our Observers with lived, learnt and practice experience to share the most pressing futures they see unfolding over a range of short and medium-term periods (5+ years out) — this will be our starting point for creating alternative futures
- Map these futures and work with our Observers with foresight experience to extrapolate them into possible worlds, and show their combined and aggregate impact (in-depth)

- Show the gaps between these unfolding possible and plausible worlds
- Show leverage points where funders and civil society could fruitfully intervene, and show the potential outcome of their intervention

We envisage this process could then be replayed by working with Observers with different subject-matter expertise, with each new set of possible worlds being added to the mapping/visualisation of possible and plausible worlds.

Work plan

August:

Review official futures; recruit Observers; establish Observatory values and behaviours

September:

Peer group discussion and review; test plans with funders; develop stimulus for Observer sessions; first round of Observer sessions

October:

Mapping, revisit Observers; layer in second round of Observer meetings and workshops; develop additional stimulus; review with funders; test values

November/December:

Mapping, revisit Observers; layer in third round of Observer meetings and workshops; revisit mapping; share progress and recommendations

What is foresight?

3

To paraphrase Cynthia Selin, foresight is a way of coping with the future.¹⁰

Unlike forecasting, foresight does not aim to create accurate predictions of future events, but instead draws on the present to shape what might come next.

As the US agency IARPA puts it, foresight is frequently used to “mitigate technological surprise” and “discover patterns of emergence for concepts that will likely emerge in several years”.¹¹

Formal foresight practices emerged throughout the 20th Century through the conjunction of militaristic forward planning and invention, consumer

marketing techniques, and Science and Technology Studies.

Partly because of its origins, there is a tendency for formal foresight to be “top down”, re-enforcing the requirements of those with existing power, and it is likely to be positioned as a high-status activity, not usually democratised or given over to participative practice, and is often characterised by trust in the inevitability of technological innovation.

One recent exception to this is the impact of Greta Thunberg's advocacy and the School Strike for Climate.

However, “informal” foresight practices happen all the time in civil society, with less focus on technology or the movement of capital, but because it is necessary for those who operate outside of traditional power to anticipate and hold the potential of multiple futures — responding to and trying to divert the reality of the present, sometimes speaking the unspeakable, while trying to shape something new.

This kind of foresight can be more implicit than explicit: rather than being captured and shared in shiny reports, it tends to live in the spirit of activism, informed by lived experience and impelled by the need for justice. While this informal and unofficial foresight is highly influential within communities, it can have a hard time cutting through to influence decision makers. One recent exception to this is the impact of Greta Thunberg's advocacy and the School Strike for Climate, which elevated the concerns of children across the world (the ultimate guardians of the future, who have little traditional influence) to the attention of both policy makers and market makers.

While informal futures can remain unspoken in the public domain, “official futures” can more easily become mistaken for self-evident truths and “present barriers to open, flexible consideration of new possibilities”.¹² For instance, influential reports about topics such as artificial intelligence or the “future of work”¹³ that contain pithy and easy-to-understand concepts have, in recent years, had outsized influence

in shaping decisions across governments and the corporate sector precisely because they have succeeded in turning difficult decisions across multiple uncertainties into realisable and memorable axioms. Despite this there is certainly nuance in the ways futures become “self evident” and the cycle through which this happens is facilitated by the role of rhetoric and the power of language through future imaginaries. It is worth noting that such imaginaries and rhetoric sometimes emerge into self-evident truths through unofficial means, and due to entrenched power dynamics, they are quickly enrolled into the narrative of “official futures”.

In this instance, the speculative (and often unproven) potential of AI to deliver efficiencies in the workforce has been privileged above measures of wellbeing or, indeed, broader economic reality. This is because much official foresight privileges the more cohesive needs of the traditionally powerful, such as investors and consulting firms, rather than the more diffuse requirements of the broader working population. This also fits with a wider narrative of technological innovation, that assumes a neat linearity to progress, one that demonstrates economic growth and constant improvements in technological development. This narrative predominantly conceptualises technology as separate from the “human” or “social”.

As such, influential foresight can have transformative effects on government policies and corporate decision

making. The impact of this work is not always solely related to the quality of the foresight practice itself, but to the networks of influence, the quality of the accompanying communication, and the relative ease with which “modern” and “future-facing” plans and policies can be created.

3.1 Building relational foresight

We have examined how established foresight practices relate to traditional power dynamics. This analysis has helped us identify the behaviours needed to generate relational foresight.

These are:

- Not top down, but **relational**
- Oriented **towards justice** not just technical possibility
- Embracing **distributed potential** rather than focussed certainty
- Rejecting reductionism, and **embracing problem making** rather than linear solutions
- Weaving together **lived, learnt and practice experience**, not prioritising technocratic expertise
- Aiming for **transformational change**, not just measurable impact

The following summarises our more detailed analysis of foresight methods, given in Appendix A (published separately).

Top down

Foresight is often the domain of corporations, consultants and specialist government agencies – established decision makers who may have interests in particular outcomes or in supporting the status quo. As Andrew Stirling points out, this means that “incumbent interests” – whether political, economic or social – most frequently “condition the unfolding of particular scientific or technological pathways”.¹⁴

For instance, the UK government has a long history of using foresight methods to inform policy and set priorities dating back to the 1960s and the development of the UK Foresight Programme. Historically, the focus of this foresight work was related to science and technology but, since the 1990s, has expanded to include more sectors and departments within the government.¹⁵ This has meant that the people whose perspectives are most engaged in government foresight work are MPs, policy advisors, business leaders, and others who are already in or connected to government. This kind of public policy-related foresight work rarely engages with civil society and voluntary sectors or the general public.

Since the early 2000s, corporate foresight has become a relatively common way of predicting consumer trends and developing new products, influenced in part by the ease of communicating new concepts with material design and the speed of technological change.¹⁶ While design-led firms such as Nike, IKEA and Apple have in-house foresight functions, businesses with less confidence in the field are able to draw on a wide range of consulting firms for foresight services, from big consultancies including Arup, PWC, Deloitte, Bain, McKinsey and BCG to boutique, specialist agencies.

A few of the funders we spoke with in our stakeholder workshops had established foresight programmes or commissioned specific research to inform their future funding strategies and investments, but it is not yet a common practice, and we did not discover a unified approach or use of a set of repeatable or shareable methods or principles.

Technically orientated

Formal foresight activity tends to happen within the realm of technology and innovation, this is in part because of the origins of formal foresight, but also because increased technical capability is often perceived to be an irresistible driver of the “future”. Technology and the accompanying movement of capital are by no means the only arbiters of possible futures; the social and environmental impacts of human activities are seen in both the climate emergency and the current pandemic. It is therefore of paramount importance for foresight that we find

ways to understand how systems, manmade and natural, are interlinked, codependent and fragile.

Focussed certainty

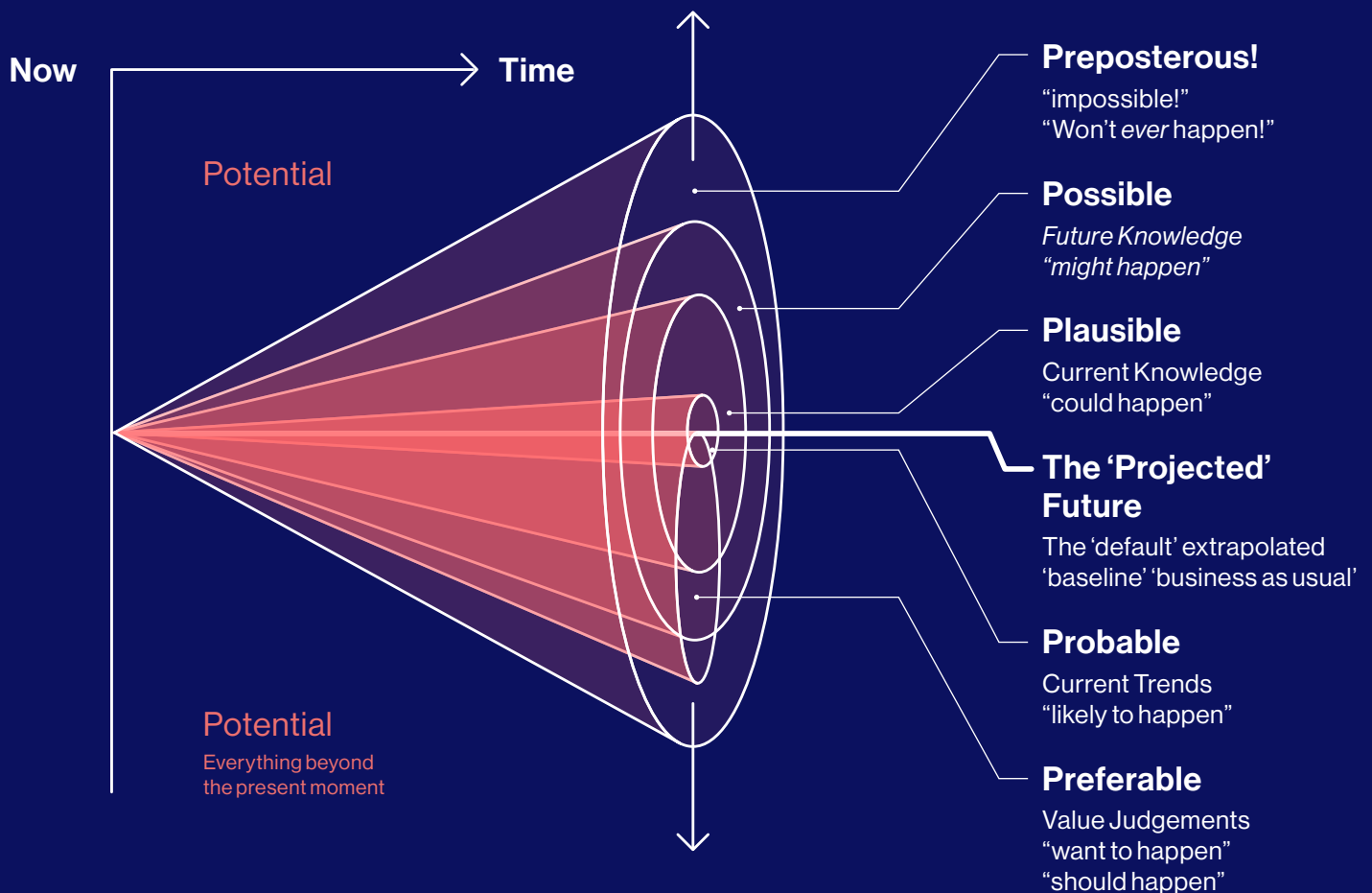
In surveying a range of existing foresight practices, it is evident that they can have the effect of smoothing away the edges and extremes of human experience, creating generalisable futures rather than addressing peripheral issues pertinent to specific publics or communities.

The most commonly cited goals of foresight exercises are to better define a problem, ensure stakeholder engagement, and facilitate policy

implementation.¹⁷ Other desired outcomes might include a shared understanding of priorities, networks to support innovation systems and harmonised visions of the future for all stakeholders. Such objectives can lead to identifying the most *probable* future,¹⁸ rather than creating the conditions to realise *preferable* futures. What this highlights is that through social negotiation foresight techniques attempt to establish a degree of *collective certainty* about the future, when perhaps the more needed thing is to put a name to *collective uncertainty* and create space for collective problem making.

Mary Warnock's 1984 "Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilisation and Embryology" gave recommendations that were both actionable

Foresight techniques attempt to establish a degree of collective certainty.



Joseph Voros's Futures Cone¹⁹

and anticipatory, looking ahead to discern the pitfalls and opportunities created by human assisted reproduction. While this was not a conventional piece of "foresight", the Committee's report needed to surmise far-reaching future implications of fertility technologies and embryology while also positing a moral framework. Warnock's foreword said that their recommendations must "[bear] witness to a moral idea of society" even though "in our pluralistic society it is not to be expected that any one set of principles can be enunciated to be completely accepted by everyone".²⁰ The Committee's report acknowledges complexity throughout – negotiating between public opinion, clinical and academic needs, fast-paced technical change and religious perspectives – and ends with notices of dissent from Committee members who disagreed with the final recommendations. The current chair of HEFA

described Warnock's achievement as "balancing the many different interests in this area for the good of patients and families", and this relationality and acknowledgement of complexity and the limits of the Committee's knowledge are one factor in the longevity of the recommendations.

Technocratic

The type of knowledge that is respected within traditional foresight can depend on the purpose of the exercise, but there is a strong tendency to skew towards technocratic and traditional notions of expertise.

Cynthia Selin²¹ argues that foresight methods have their own epistemological schemes that specify what counts as anticipatory knowledge and designate the proper channels through which such knowledge

should be generated and shared. However, this flexibility does not often extend beyond what would be considered a technocratic notion of expertise²² because, in order for expectations about the future to be legitimated, they require the backing of ‘expertise’.²³ For instance, many foresight events are by invitation only, open to a few recognised practitioners.

This risks assuming that anticipatory knowledge can always be codified and cited or embodied by the traditionally powerful, and leaves little room for the introduction of lived and emerging knowledges and experiences.²⁴

For instance, a Delphi study is one that works with an appointed set of experts to arrive at a group decision. Examples include the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation’s recent (2021) expert forum exploring AI and misinformation²⁵ and Salamanca-Buentello and others’ 2005 investigation into democracy and nanotechnology. These techniques value expert understanding and privilege anticipatory knowledge created through formal expertise, which is intended to build a sense of objectivity, but they risk only accounting for perspectives that are already evidenced through research, and miss out on weak signals that are observable to those with relevant lived experience.

Impact not engagement

Rather than developing techniques to directly involve the public in foresight, there has been greater emphasis on measuring “social impact” within existing foresight methods. López Peláez argues, “in democratic societies... people want more information and greater participation in the development and implementation of technologies that affect their daily lives”.²⁶ Because of this, methodologies in future studies increasingly include analysis of social impacts. For example, real time technology assessments²⁷ or the development of Ethical, Legal and Social Implications (ELSI) research. However, few of these methodologies actively engage citizens, instead they seek only to take account of perceived social factors.

Conclusion

In conclusion there are many ways in which our analysis of foresight practice can create a taxonomy within which our project sits. What is most important to note, is the limitations of this report, primarily that there is nuance within our definitions of “official” and “unofficial” futures, some of which we may have not have addressed in order to keep this report as succinct as possible. It is useful to acknowledge and reiterate here that the categorisation of foresight into official dominant narrative futures, and unofficial emergent futures is imperfect, but this distinction acts to frame our project in a constructive way. It acts as a framing from which we believe we can build a model for relational foresight. One that might lead to insights that strengthen the practice of foresight in the future, and build collective foresight in the present.

What is Civil Society Foresight?

4

We propose that civil society foresight is an alternative to the traditional narrative of “official” foresight and an alternative to participatory foresight practices; one that decentres both the interests of the market and the drive towards consensus. Instead, it **prioritises just outcomes and anticipatory knowledge derived from people and communities;** this knowledge might be gained from activities undertaken in “love or anger or creativity, or principle”²⁸ or earned through lived, practiced or learnt experience or expertise.²⁹

It is tempting to describe this in a hierarchical way, as “bottom up” rather than “top down”,

but it is more complex than that: it is vibrant, relational and complex. In prioritising alternative sources of knowledge and alternative questions, we are not suggesting an inversion of power dynamics, but a refocus of futuring as an inclusive practice of plurality and interconnection.

Embracing and describing relational complexity is particularly important in the present moment. The pandemic and the climate emergency are just two of many factors increasing near-term uncertainty, making it more difficult for broad communities to settle on common or shared “known knowns”;

meanwhile polarised narratives about topics including “the culture wars” have become more dominant in the media,³⁰ reflecting the extremes of debates, not the everyday complexity within them. In this context, showing and giving plausible life to multiple possibilities is vitally important.

Our approach is inspired in part by what Donna Haraway refers to as a “thick copresence”, with other humans, other beings, and with Earth herself,³¹ and by Arturo Escobar’s exploration of the Pluriverse.³² The aim is to make it more possible to envisage and co-create “a world where many worlds fit”³³ so that civil society funding, investment and support can flow more readily to alternative ways of thinking and doing, and not reinforce and adopt by default priorities dictated by markets.

4.1 From participatory to relational

Broader participatory and reflexive deliberation is an increasingly popular method for collective problem solving; this is one way of challenging top-down decision-making, and there are a range of practical methods for undertaking this work, from formal inquiries through to citizen juries that convene “mini-publics” to consider important issues. This is relevant to our framing of the Civil Society Foresight Observatory because it is one of the most tangible current challenges to “official” information gathering, and is a shift towards “bottom up” — the first, and most obvious, step in challenging the established flow of power.

Participatory, “bottom-up” foresight practices tend to aim towards consensus rather than toward a plurality of possibility. This is in part because scenarios need to be imagined and imaginable and emit relatively strong signals to be interrogated in this way. Questions need to be posed in relatable and understandable contexts,

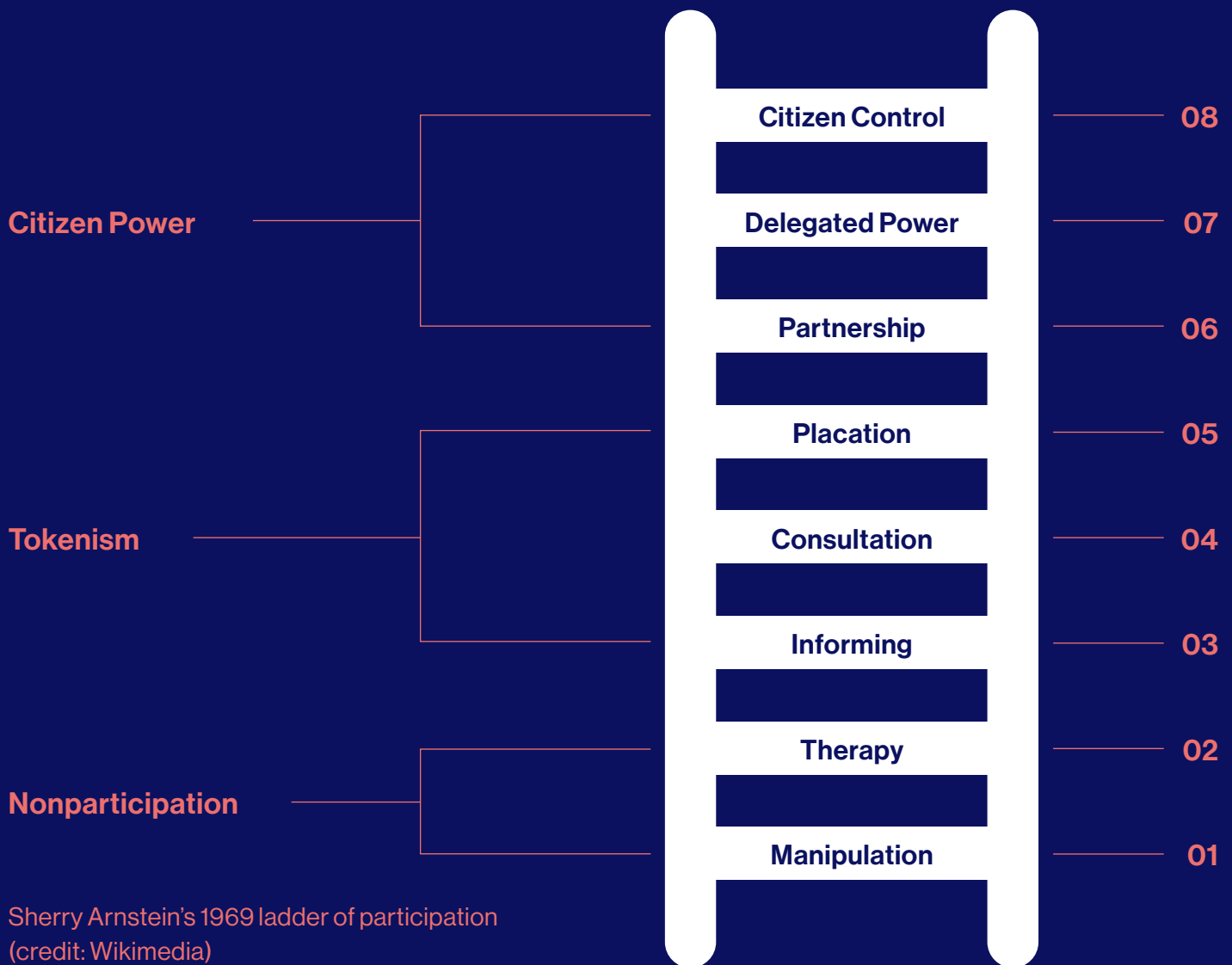
and a shared language can be desirable to enable effective communication across different areas of lived, learnt and practice expertise.

Often these processes also attempt to offer a microcosm of public opinion because their aim is to create a new norm for a significant new paradigm, such as devolution, a new use of technology³⁴ or a new public behaviour.³⁵ Citizen juries are an act of balancing the requirements of individuals with society as a whole, rather than a reflection of different publics’ experience, expectations or sentiment. Accommodation of broad public sentiment in this way can, however, mean that giving ease at majority scale is prioritised over harm mitigation for any one minority or collection of minority interests.

“Participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless.”

Sherry Arnstein’s influential 1969 “ladder of participation” sets out “the extent of citizens’ power in determining the end product”. Despite being more than fifty years old, her critique of the theatre of participation is still relevant for less well-managed participation programmes. Many deliberative decision-making programmes happen within traditional power structures and are a response to questions posed by the traditionally powerful: the very act of convening is an expression of power, and more seemingly trivial aspects, such as who writes the questions or sets the topics, entrench that power and reduce the transformative potential of the process.

As Arnstein says, “participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless”, and the ladder shows the extent to which



anything short of citizen control, delegated power and partnership are tokenistic and fundamentally non-participative.³⁶ Consultation sits in the middle of the ladder, and Arnstein says,

Inviting citizens' opinions, like informing them, can be a legitimate step toward their full participation. But if consulting them is not combined with other modes of participation, this rung is still a sham... People are perceived primarily as statistical abstractions... What citizens achieve in all this activity is that they have "participated in participation".

When members of communities are given collaborative decision-making power, alongside

traditional experts and officials, Arnstein goes on to state that "rights and responsibilities" need to be clear to ensure that participation is effective and effectual, rather than tokenistic.

Arnstein's framing shows that, even at the top of the ladder, citizen control is still limited by who sets the terms of engagement, and that participative process must be accompanied by a meaningful redistribution of power.

Even the terms "bottom-up" and "top-down" suppose both a hierarchy and a linear progression of knowledge; instead we want to situate the Foresight Commons in the expansive and relational space that sits between the two, subverting traditional notions of power through collapsing them and according equal respect to lived, learnt and practice experience.

In "Rethinking the Public Sphere", Nancy Fraser puts forward the concept that society has always been

a set of competing publics, rather than a single coherent whole. For Fraser, a universal public sphere in which there is “a deliberative area ... where extant status are bracketed and neutralised” is simply an illusion created by the already powerful, and she advocates instead for “contestation among a plurality of competing publics”.³⁷

This kind of contestation may seem uncomfortable in the context of contemporary narratives of social division, but making the edges and concerns of different publics and counter-publics more visible will show emerging areas of concern, points of leverage, and highlight things in common. In fact, our hypothesis is that highlighting differences is a useful and necessary part of setting out a plurality of preferable futures.

4.2 Some Examples of Civil Society Foresight

The Civil Society Foresight Observatory is entering a larger ecosystem of innovative foresight projects that prioritise collaboration and do not un/consciously replicate existing power hierarchies and injustices.

We have begun to map the projects that currently exist to see where exactly the Foresight Observatory fits in. Keeping in line with the idea of relationality that is central to the Foresight Observatory, we believe it is important for us to acknowledge this necessary work already underway and the lessons we can learn from them. We also want to specify how the Foresight Observatory differentiates from existing projects and the opportunities such gaps present for our work.

UNDP: Foresight Principles

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is integrating foresight into their organisational processes as part of their efforts to make implementation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) more effective. UNDP research has produced a few key recommendations for engaging strategic foresight, including:

- The need to provide adequate resources for foresight practices

- Separating inter-agency strategic collaboration processes from resource and budgeting conversations to limit competition and encourage collaboration across agencies;
- And finding clear ways to mandate foresight innovation without burdening staff and limiting staff agency.

Their foresight practices have focused on opening the strategic planning process to a broader range of society, at times including youth, academics, civil servants, and other citizens outside of government.³⁸

The aim of this programme is to democratise foresight practices so that they are more participatory. One unique aspect of the UNDP process is the integration of “theories of harm” in their foresight approach. Intentionally engaging “theories of harm” attempts to avoid “lock[ing] people into future harm, future indebtedness or future inequity”,³⁹ a key consideration the Foresight Observatory will need to learn from and apply.

Whose Knowledge?: The Community Knowledge Sharing Initiative

The Community Knowledge Sharing initiative led by Whose Knowledge? began in 2017, aiming “to build and document a model that can be used, refined, and adapted...to address systemic bias [within Wikipedia and other knowledge repositories] in partnership with marginalized communities”.⁴⁰ This pilot project worked with several communities — Dalits in India and the U.S. and queer feminists in Bosnia and Herzegovina — to build maps of the gaps and opportunities related to knowledge by and about each community and to create Wikimedia content based on those maps. Through the project, Whose Knowledge? and the partner groups generated a large number of resources, including practical frameworks and tools that can be used to add more knowledge to Wikipedia. They also learned and shared useful approaches for “thoughtfully and respectfully” “supporting marginalised communities to add more knowledge to Wikimedia projects”.⁴¹

While the aims of this project are significantly different to those of the Foresight Observatory, it demonstrates good practice in how to make and use tools to collaboratively generate, collect, and share information, and centre alternative sources of expertise.

Omidyar Network: Exploration and Sensing Unit

The Omidyar Network launched the Exploration & Sensing unit in 2019 to “shake old patterns of thinking, and activat[e] new collaborations”. Part of this effort is providing funding support to four projects engaged in innovative futures work: the Radical Imagination podcast; the Next Generation Foresight Practitioners network; the Guild of Future Architects community; and the design studio, COMUZI.⁴² Together, these projects are offering new ideas of what a more equitable future might look like and actively engaging a broader range of voices and perspectives in futures thinking. Democratising foresight access and practices is an important step towards ensuring foresight processes do not replicate existing power dynamics. The Exploration & Sensing unit’s supported projects approach this goal from a greater consideration of the *what* and *who* of foresight work; the Foresight Observatory is aiming to tackle it from a focus on *how* (which inevitably includes the *what* and *who* but from a different vantage point).

Ada Lovelace: Rapid Public Deliberation

The Ada Lovelace Institute, Traverse, Involve, and Bang the Table partnered to convene a rapid, online public discussion “to explore attitudes to the use of COVID-19 related technologies for transitioning out of lockdown”.⁴³ Using a combination of methods, including facilitated discussions on Zoom and a private online forum, they guided discussions focused on the question: “Under what circumstances do citizens think that technological solutions like the COVID-19 contact tracing app are appropriate?”⁴⁴

The project had four main objectives: “influence research content”; “generat[e] timely research data”; “influence[e] research strategy”; and “testing and learning”⁴⁵. Though they did not make explicit recommendations, the data they generated through participant engagement concluded that in order for a Government contact tracing app to be “trusted and justified” it would need to meet four criteria: 1) transparent evidence; 2) independent review process; 3) clear defining of data use and rights; and 4) “proactively address the needs of, and risks relating to, vulnerable groups”.⁴⁶

This research was centred on using participatory methods to gain perspectives on governance and regulation of technology already being developed by the Government. This differs from our aims with the Foresight Observatory in two ways: we are more interested in a relational process that scopes future possibilities rather than finding consensus about how to make existing technology more legitimate and effective to a broader public, and in scoping out possibilities, rather than on mitigating harms.

Despite these differences in objectives, the Foresight Observatory can gain some key insights into designing for a rapid process in a constantly changing context with the facilitation limitations posed by the pandemic (i.e. meeting only online instead of in-person or a mix of both). The learning they have shared suggests starting with broad questions to accommodate for the rapidly changing circumstances, using breakout rooms and other small group activities during workshops, and finding ways to generate and capture emotion⁴⁷ with online facilitation, such as doing paired work and shared activities, or using chat forums.⁴⁸

Prioritising just outcomes and anticipatory knowledge

Conclusion

This is not an exhaustive survey of existing foresight activity, but it demonstrates some of the range of approaches in play across civil society.

The majority of these projects have taken a participatory, rather than a relational approach, centering different types of knowledge and wisdom. Building on and learning from these programmes has been vital to developing our relational approach, and shows where there are opportunities to layer new approaches into the existing ecosystem: these include creating shared infrastructure for knowledge and foresight; continuous cross-sector, cross-expertise collaboration and conversation; and creating and sharing foresight through a dynamic, generative process.

Conclusions

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Through our pilot we are attempting to create a relational foresight commons that puts decentred, alternative knowledge in conversation with dominant or “official” future narratives. Achieving this, depends on abiding by the following values:

- Ensuring foresight from all sources has equal status
- Establishing a pragmatic approach that is an alternative to “official” and “unofficial” foresight practices, one that allows for collective problem making.
- Consistently making visible the gaps, connections and nuance between “official” and “unofficial” futures
- Being useful and intelligible to both funders and to wider civil society

And ensuring we enact the following behaviours:

- Not top down, but **relational**
- Oriented **towards justice** not just technical possibility
- Embracing **distributed potential** rather than focussed certainty
- Rejecting reductionism, and **embracing problem making** rather than linear solutions.
- Respecting **lived, learnt and practice experience** as well as technocratic expertise
- Aim for **transformational change**, not just measurable impact

Alongside gathering feedback on this document, our next steps are:

September:

Review official futures; recruit Observers; establish Observatory values and behaviours

October:

Peer group discussion and review; test plans with funders; develop stimulus for Observer sessions; first round of Observer sessions

November:

Mapping, revisit Observers; layer in second round of Observer meetings and workshops; develop additional stimulus; review with funders; test values

December:

Mapping, revisit Observers; layer in third round of Observer meetings and workshops; revisit mapping; share progress and recommendations

Some Definitions

Civil Society

“Civil society involves all of us. When we act not for profit nor because the law requires us to, but out of love or anger or creativity, or principle, we are civil society. When we bring together our friends or colleagues or neighbours to have fun or to defend our rights or to look after each other, we are civil society. Whether we organise through informal friendship networks, Facebook groups, community events and protests; or formal committees, charities, faiths and trade unions, whether we block runways or co-ordinate coffee mornings, sweat round charity runs or make music for fun; **when we organise ourselves outside the market and the state, we are all civil society**”.⁴⁹

Commons

“In the English language the term *commons* exists as a noun to describe something that is held/used within a community or rather shared by all or many”.⁵⁰

Experts by Experience

“Social change-makers who seek to use their lived experience to inform the work of social purpose organisations, to drive and lead social change, and/or to drive their social impact work”.⁵¹

Learnt Experience

Experience(s) that help people develop tangible skills and other competencies that can then be applied towards work in various sectors. Learnt experience can also be informed by lived experience.⁵²

Lived Experience

“The experience(s) of people on whom a social issue, or combination of issues, has had a direct impact”.⁵³

Official futures

“Dominant future narratives [or] so-called ‘official futures’... Organizations large and small lean on official futures as north stars or guidance systems, to keep employees, partners or constituents focussed on a mission ... and they reflect the overriding assumptions that are necessary to believe in a mission”.⁵⁴

Practice Experience

Experience(s) gained as a social-change practitioner.

Weak signals

“The earliest, smallest signals of change, particularly where the overall pattern they point to isn’t yet readily evident. Weak signals are the items, data or stories that catch your eye as curious, out of place and potentially noteworthy, based on your experience and knowledge”.⁵⁵

Related publications

This Discovery Report has two appendices, both published separately: Appendix A, “Cultivating a Plurality of Futures”, is a more detailed overview of existing foresight methods; Appendix B is a full bibliography. Both are available to read at <http://careful.industries/foresight-observatory/>.

Credits

This report was written by Rachel Coldicutt, Anna Williams and Dominique Barron. It was designed by [Honest Studio](#). The website was created by Kim Plowright and operational support was provided by Ashleigh Folan.

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