



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

Forecasting & Futurism

January 2012 – Issue 4

Investigating the Future: Lessons from the "Scene of the Crime"

By Charles Brass



Futurists investigate clues and evidence to attempt to answer difficult questions, much like crime-scene investigators. But while CSIs try to determine things that have already happened, futurists look to what may yet happen, and what we can do now to influence it.

As practitioners of a relatively young profession, futurists are frequently asked to explain what they do. Often, the askers have some skepticism. I personally have lost track of the number of times people have asked to see my crystal ball or my time machine when I have shown them my business card.

Many people seem to be unable to get their heads around the idea that it is possible to learn something useful about events or situations that have not yet happened. Yet, when archaeologists report on what they have learned, no one doubts their professionalism, despite the fact that they were not at the time and place they are observing.



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This is why, when I am asked to explain what a futurist does, I use the analogy of an archaeologist or, for younger audiences, a crime-scene investigator. Most practicing futurists are at least as interested in the past as they are in the future, but my use of this analogy goes far beyond simply acknowledging that how we arrived at the present has a powerful impact on what will happen in the future.

Both crime-scene investigators and futurists are interested in learning more about a time and place remote from themselves, and both use increasingly sophisticated sets of tools and techniques to help them expand their knowledge. Before they begin to use any of these tools, however, they follow a series of protocols that are designed to ensure that they do their job rigorously and that others can validate and replicate their work. This article looks at some of the rules that crime-scene investigators (CSIs) follow. These rules have direct parallels in helping to shape not only good crime-scene analysis, but good futures practice, as well.

DETERMINING THE INVESTIGATION'S BOUNDARIES

The first thing that CSIs do is to define the physical space in which they are interested and then cordon this area off. This is no trivial exercise. The CSIs expect to invest considerable time and energy in examining the interior of that quarantined space, recognizing all the while that drawing too wide a boundary may yield only marginally more knowledge. Similarly, drawing too narrow a boundary will increase the likelihood that important information will be overlooked. In any case, no boundary can possibly capture everything or everybody of interest.

Futurists, too, have to delineate boundaries around the themes in which they and their clients are interested. As good systems thinkers, futurists are acutely aware of the extent to which everything is interconnected, and they are always concerned that important information may lie outside the immediate area of their focus.

They also know (and if they don't, their clients always remind them) that they don't have an infinite amount of time within which to explore the future. Futures work is designed to enhance the quality of decisions made in the present, and clients most often want to make decisions quickly. For instance, those responsible for public-school

systems must anticipate numbers of incoming kindergarteners some years in advance, but this is difficult in the absence of detailed information about such things as decisions to open or close local factories, or planned changes in zoning regulations.

The CSI has an advantage over the futurist in that the boundary of an official crime scene is marked with very visible tape that everybody understands and most people respect. Even if futurists are meticulous and explicit about defining the boundaries of a particular assignment, the nature of their work and the people they work with mean these boundaries regularly get challenged or ignored. Nonetheless, most futurists find it very helpful in their consulting work to take time early in the process to discuss, and hopefully agree on, the boundaries within which any particular assignment will take place.

Of course, good CSIs know that a new discovery might at any time cause an expansion of the taped-off area. Similarly, futures work is made easier if the futurist and the client can explicitly acknowledge that some proposed new action is taking the assignment beyond the previously agreed boundaries. In the school system example, chronic flooding in the region may also impact families' relocation decisions, so the futurist's boundaries might need to expand to include environmental factors.

There is more to the tape around a crime scene; however, than just simply defining where the CSI will focus attention. The tape reminds others that the space inside is a special place and needs to be treated carefully.

This is another way in which the CSI has an advantage over the futurist. CSIs can pretty well ensure that no one will enter their area of interest unless they have been invited, and even then they will follow the CSI's rules of conduct. In effect, the CSIs attempt to freeze the crime scene until they complete their investigation.

Futurists' areas of interest can rarely be as conveniently frozen while the analysis takes place. Nonetheless, if people who do continue to move around inside the demarked area are aware that, for the moment, this is a special space, they are more likely to think more carefully about the actions

they take. Perhaps the members of the school board might need to be reminded to factor their yet-to-be completed future scanning into their current budget cycle.

For futurists, marking out the territory of interest in a particular investigation includes identifying the people who habitually occupy that territory. Letting all these people know that an investigation is taking place can often reduce the accidental damage done by those who aren't aware of the significance of the space.

Of course, not everyone's motives are pure and wholesome. Both CSIs and futurists need to be aware that some people will deliberately try to mislead or taint the crime scene or the future space.

ANALYZING EVIDENCE OBJECTIVELY

Having drawn a boundary around their area of interest, CSIs then get down to work. They know that their primary role is to carefully notice and document as much as possible. In addition to their five human senses, they bring their experience and a variety of technological tools to help them in this work.

They are acutely aware that their mere presence on the scene changes things, and that their human prejudices and biases color what they notice and how they report on what they notice. They are aware, too, that some of their work is unpleasant, and that it is a natural human reaction to try and cover up some of this unpleasantness.

Futurists, too, are most often outsiders that other people bring in to a situation to help make sense of it. Like any other human beings, too, futurists are prone to bring biases and prejudices to everything they do. Just as the fingerprints of all CSIs and police officers are recorded so they can be eliminated from the investigation, so futurists need to be careful to eliminate as much of their influence on the scene as they can.

Futurists also should know that, whatever specialist expertise they claim to bring, many others on the scene will nonetheless seek to bring their perspectives to the situation. In particular, futurists need to be aware of the natural human tendency to avoid unpleasantness. The best futurists are

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skilled at presenting the results of their work in such a way that all relevant aspects are given their appropriate weight.

Placing a tape around a crime scene gives the impression that the moment of the crime has been frozen for analysis by the CSI. The skilled investigator, whether CSI or futurist, knows that everything changes, even during an investigation, so the more they know about how things change, the more useful they will be.

In this regard, the training that futurists receive might give them an advantage over the CSIs. Learning to appreciate all the dimensions within which change takes place is an integral part of futurist training, and good futurists are aware that only dead things change in regularly predictable ways.

The CSIs are almost always examining purely physical, geographic space. Futurists, on the other hand, explore landscapes that are shaped and populated by human beings for whom change is an unpredictable inevitability.

CSIs' specialist expertise is most often accepted by all those involved. They can often rely on the legal system both to support their efforts and to compel the participation of all those in whom they are interested.

Alas, futurists have no such legal mandate. Where the CSI can usually assume that those who commission their work are genuinely interested in their professional analysis—such as identifying a cause of death or indicating a probable perpetrator—futurists often confront unwilling participants or even clients unwilling to listen to what has been learned.

CSIs are provided with an ever-expanding toolkit, much of which is the result of developments in science and technology. In particular, they have access to many tools that enhance or extend human senses and give precise quantitative data.

Futurists, too, have access to an expanding toolkit. Like the CSIs', much of the futurists' equipment is designed to supplement individual human senses, often by aggregating information across larger populations. Some of the futurist toolkit is also designed to tap into underutilized areas of the human experience, such as myth, metaphor, and worldview. Often, the futurists seek to sharpen human senses by focusing them in a variety of ways. Modern technology enhances the futurist toolkit by allowing the collection, analysis, and interpretation of quantities of data that would otherwise stretch human capability.

Whatever tools are used, both the CSIs and the futurists need to be aware of the limitations of human ability to understand and interpret the information before them. And they also need to be aware that some people have malicious intent and can either inadvertently or consciously taint the data.

STUDYING THE PAST AND STUDYING THE FUTURE

CSIs and futurists are both part of our modern world because human beings are relentlessly interested in the world around them. Since none of us can be everywhere at all times, we are collectively prepared to invest in developing the skills of that special subset of people who can help us make sense of a world we did not, or could not, experience: the past and the future.

Good CSIs know that the past is not a space that anyone can completely understand. No matter how many resources we bring to bear on studying it, our comprehension of the past—even of very recent events—will always be imperfect. What CSIs expect to do is to work diligently to reduce this imperfection as much as they can.

FUTURISTS, ON THE OTHER HAND, EXPLORE LANDSCAPES THAT ARE SHAPED AND POPULATED BY HUMAN BEINGS FOR WHOM CHANGE IS AN UNPREDICTABLE INEVITABILITY.

Futurists can relate to this: The future is also inherently uncertain. They strive to reduce the uncertainties as much as possible by applying systemic and systematic approaches to understanding the future.

There is a final, crucial difference between CSIs and futurists, however. CSIs primarily exist to help others understand what has happened. Futurists are interested in what may happen and are even more interested in what we would like to happen. Futures work is about both understanding the future and creating it.

In *The Clock of the Long Now*, futurist Stewart Brand wrote: “Our experience of time is asymmetric. We can see the past, but not influence it. We can influence the future, but not see it.” He may have been wrong on both counts. Many people behave as though they could influence the past, and we all strive to see the future. What both CSIs and futurists remind us is that doing all these things will be improved if it is done systematically and rigorously.

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Crime-Scene Futurists: Six Rules from CSI

1. Explicitly describe the boundary marking the edges of the space in which you are interested. There often will be physical, temporal, and/or organizational dimensions of this boundary, and all need to be identified.
2. Ensure that all the people who normally inhabit this space, or are likely to enter the space during the project, are aware of the project and its aims.
3. Document the current contents of the space in as much detail as time and resources permit.
4. Investigate the provenance of the space with as much diligence as you can.
5. Notice how, and why, the space changes during the project. Look for both the internal and external forces that might explain these changes.
6. Use appropriate tools from your futurist toolkit to begin to tease out the future for the space.

—Charles Brass