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Moving forward with complexity and diversity

*Futures® is an international, refereed, multidisciplinary journal concerned with medium and long-term futures of cultures and societies, science and technology, economics and politics, environment and the planet and individuals and humanity.*

*Covering methods and practices of futures studies, the journal seeks the rigorous examination of possible and alternative futures of all human endeavours. Futures® seeks to promote divergent and pluralistic visions, ideas and opinions about the future [1].*

For an incoming Editor, this statement of purpose is simultaneously exciting and challenging. One can only try to apply it rigorously. It is essential for *Futures* to be diverse and rigorous, particularly if we want the journal to be noticed and its contents taken seriously. As an academic journal, the role of *Futures* is to generate and publish new knowledge which informs policy and practices and highlight the potentials, threats and multiple possibilities that lay in the distant horizon. It should also enhance the practice of professional futurists through robust development of theory and methodology. One could summarise the role of Futures Studies and the primary journal of the field as contributing to knowledge about all aspects of society's relationships with the future.

However, there are many fields of study that give insights into such relationships, whether these relationships are creative, destructive or mostly harmless. We need to be aware of developments in other disciplines as well as share our methodological strengths with other fields; take futures thinking to new areas and augment futures thought with new knowledge from established and emerging disciplines. This means that the journal must engage with numerous, diverse networks of contributors and readers.

The futures field, and its associated Namesakes [2], is one of the most exciting and intellectually challenging arenas of contemporary times. Without doubt, it offers the most important social, economic and political narratives of a rapidly changing, globalised world. We have no hesitation in calling it a 'field', a trans-disciplinary field if you like, because if it was not, then one wonders what would be the purpose of its excellent range of journals, including this particular one, if not to develop the field.

When *Futures* celebrated its 40th anniversary, in 2008, Zia Sardar invited contributions on the progress of the field since the inception of the journal in 1968. The special issue [3] is worth reading again as it charts and lays out a broad and compelling set of developments in and narratives about the field. Some themes covered in the early editions are very recognisable as hot topics of the 2012, such as futures of Europe, ethical finance, globalisation, chaos and complexity and postnormal science. However, some highly significant areas today, like the emergence of China and India as global powers and the debates on genetic engineering, were missing forty years ago. This tells us that discourses

within the field are dynamic, that they reflect the zeitgeist, while more fundamental principles of how humans live and act, individually and collectively, to shape the futures of everyone and everything on the planet are constantly interrogated.

What accompanied the formation of *Futures* in 1968 was an expectation that through improved knowledge and methods, the future would be more easily predicated or forecast, and as a corollary, more controlled and would be much 'better'. The first editorial expressed this certainty in the title: 'Confidence from chaos' [4]. Now we know better. The field has certainly developed significantly since 1968, both by assimilating multiple disciplinary perspectives and by generating its own conceptual and linguistic identity, but uncertainty and a bit of humility must now be the norm.

What we have discovered since then is that greater world knowledge, and the generative process and the actions arising from such knowledge, produce more complexity and diversity. Our multiple and alternative futures are, by definition, not just diverse but also link the whole of humanity in a complex web. Yet, human capacity for the generation of diversity is reduced by institutions which exert power, sometimes producing benefits for society, sometimes marginalising the unlucky ones born in the wrong place at the wrong time or whose diversity is anathema to those who can and should, but do not, make a positive difference. We believe that all voices of future generations need to be heard; particularly the voices of those people whose present and futures are blighted and threatened by dominant groups.

We now understand the key issues of complexity and diversity quite differently from 44 years ago, when the journal was established. Complexity and diversity fundamentally changes the relationship between humans and their futures, and how we study and explore these futures. We cannot control our futures. But we can control ourselves and we can be aware of some, if not all, consequences of our actions. We can be aware of the emasculation of diverse futures by institutional power, which is frequently hidden. Knowledge about the future will never be enough because it is incomplete at best. Planning is important to reduce costs and risks, choices have to be made in the use of resources, closed systems are programmable, the classification of emergent knowledge is vital to understanding today's worlds. All of these intellectual and academic activities are important; but none are Futures Studies. The chief meaningful characteristic of Futures Studies is ontological and epistemological insecurity, not confidence from chaos. Our experienced world is continuously being reconstructed through flows of information and actions. There are more worlds than we could ever know. The best we can hope for is awareness from flows.

The corollary of this uncertainty puts greater emphasis on the processes by which futures are generated and the ethical and moral frameworks that guide human activity within these processes. The futures field is not a virtue free zone. Reflexive knowledge-about-the-future so far has, in general, failed to balance the responsibility for future generations with attainments for the present generation. Many of us contributing to *Futures* have personally benefited from this imbalance. But we should use our investment knowledge wisely. We should, and can, develop greater critical reflexivity in the field, for example to bring explicit values and power relations in narratives of the future to the fore and to encourage critical

questioning by all. Every claim made about the future has to be questioned and critically examined. All claims about the future, one could argue, are coloured by the intentions of the claimant.

Our research and intellectual endeavours should act as a guide to uncertain times and societies' relationships with their own futures. We need to and we can make an important contribution to the development and survival of humanity. Our work should inspire people to do good things.

We look forward to seeing long-standing and regular, as well as many new and upcoming, contributors in the pages of *Futures*.

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- [3] Symposium: Futures at Forty' *Futures* 40 (10) (2008) 893 et seq.
- [4] Editorial, *Futures-Confidence from chaos*, *Futures*, 1 (1) (1969) 2-3.