

THE FUTURIST

Forecasts, Trends, and Ideas about the Future

www.wfs.org

November-December 2014

Outlook 2015

THE FUTURIST's
roundup of the most
thought-provoking
forecasts of the
year. Page 29

Could a Machine Have Predicted This? page 20

Tomorrow's Employment Ecosystem, page 14

Libraries as Knowledge Creators? page 24

Conference report, WorldFuture 2014: What If, page 39

\$5.95



0 74470 119151 3

FUTURISTS AND THEIR IDEAS

An interview with Karl Albrecht

Why Pop Futurism Fails

Futurists need a healthy skepticism of overhyped predictions about the “next big thing.”

A former physicist and military intelligence officer, Karl Albrecht is an executive advisor, consultant, speaker, and author. Among his books focusing on professional and organizational achievement and strategy are *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Success* (Pfeiffer, 2009) and *Practical Intelligence: The Art and Science of Common Sense* (Pfeiffer, 2007).

THE FUTURIST: Do you refer to yourself as a “futurist”? If so, how do you explain the profession to other people? And if not, what would you say your profession is?

Karl Albrecht: I identify myself as a management consultant by occupation, and a futurist by avocation. Many of the engagements I’ve been involved with have included analyzing trends, events, speculations, predictions, and forecasts in the context of *strategic thinking*. I’m usually less involved in *making* predictions and more involved in *using* them.

That experience has given me a particular slant, or bias, about what makes a useful forecast. I can’t afford to be advising executives to bet their organizations’ futures on questionable predictions, no matter how trendy or dramatic they seem.

Over the years, I’ve evolved a basic set of four criteria, which I use to gauge any kind of forecast:

1. It should be anchored in some relevant *context*: What is the expected impact, on what, and for whom?

2. It should be *time-bounded*: In what year, or range of years, is it expected to come to fruition?

3. It should be *verifiable*: What observable criteria will we take as evidence that it has come to pass?

4. It should be *confidence-rated*: All predictions are guesses, and we might as well admit it by attaching an estimate of uncertainty to the statement. Plus or minus how many years? What confidence percentage do we attach to it—70%, 80%, 90%?

What’s the most useful futurist tool in your toolkit?

My most useful futurist tool is what Ernest Hemingway referred to as having “a built-in automatic crap detector.” Whenever I read or hear a grand, glittering, bold prediction about the “next big thing” that’s going to revolutionize the way we do this or that, I immediately ask: Where is this coming from? Who’s promoting it? Is there a commercial or self-interested agenda behind this, or is it the result of a carefully reasoned analysis from an uncontaminated viewpoint?

We’re living in an age of hyperbole. The frenzied media environment amplifies everything, to the point where those who are vying for our attention must exag-



“Every new idea deserves a hearing, but the overcaffeinated rhetoric of pop futurists does little, I believe, to lend perspective and discipline to the process of thinking about where things are going.”

gerate, sensationalize, titillate, pander, or appeal to our voyeuristic tendencies in order to get their messages into our brains. Truth, balance, perspective, and objectivity are the inevitable casualties of this polluted thought field.

Every new idea deserves a hearing, but the overcaffeinated rhetoric of pop futurists does little, I believe, to lend perspective and discipline to the process of thinking about where things are going.

What “wild card” keeps you awake at night?

The prospect of a global spasm—a cataclysmic failure of some piece of the unfathomably complex world infrastructure that interlocks commerce, information, technology, capital, energy distribution, food and water supply, and unstable Third World political processes. Some event, such as a runaway cyberwar between nations, might cause a domino-like collapse in the world megasystem that could make the 2008 financial collapse seem like a minor gas pain.

If we’re not extinct in another 10 years, I hope to see human minds outperforming computers, not being replaced by them. Maybe we can teach people to use their brains at some level approaching their evolutionary potential.

Brag a little. As a futurist, what do you think you’ve gotten most “right”?

First, my favorite failed prediction: With the arrival of the personal computer, the Dvorak keyboard—with its

superior ergonomic arrangement of keys—would replace the 100-year-old QWERTY keyboard. I'm still waiting.

My favorite bull's-eye was the "dot-bomb" crash of 2000. I predicted this in a presentation to the international advisory board of one of Wall Street's mega-firms, as well as in other situations. I saw through the "digital mania" and recognized that Internet start-ups were burning through investor cash at terrifying rates, many with no coherent business model, plan, or even product.

Venture capitalists, who should have known better,

became hypnotized with the new "tulip bulb" mania, and threw money at just about any geek who claimed to have an idea. When the cash ran out, the venture capitalists closed their wallets, tech stocks cratered, and the whole stock market went south. It was a case of "too much, too soon," and it took another five years for "e-commerce" to become viable. □

Karl Albrecht's most recent article for THE FUTURIST, "Deconstructing the Future: Seeing beyond 'Magic Wand' Predictions," appeared in the July-August 2014 issue. His Web site is www.KarlAlbrecht.com.

ORDER YOUR COPY
FROM EDUCATION WEEK PRESS

21
TRENDS
for the **21st Century**

Out of the Trenches
and into the Future

By Gary Marx

**Out of the Trenches.
Into the Future.**

Author Gary Marx explores
21 trends impacting
education and our future.

“ Gary Marx has masterfully
given us a glimpse of the future in its
many aspects, and has also shown
us how to prepare to deal with its
major challenges. **”**

Jack Jennings,
Founder, Center on
Education Policy

**ORDER
TODAY!**

www.edweek.org/go/21Trends