

Becoming Futurists

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*The valorization addendum gives me the opportunity to share my thoughts on the societal merits of this thesis *Becoming Futurists*. In other words, I will discuss how I create value by making the study available for social usage (Van Drooge and Vandenburg et al., 2011). Writing *Becoming Futurists* was an academic as well as a personal journey to better understand the role of futurists in society. In the next pages, I detail the lessons that I have learned and how they are of societal value.*

As a newcomer to the future industry, I observed the wealth of knowledge that the future brings, and the societal relevance that this knowledge carries. I am convinced that when people, including myself, become knowledgeable about possible futures, it provides them guidance in the rapidly changing world we live in. Changes happen at such a fast pace that people feel overwhelmed. Is it really possible that robots will replace people in the workforce? Will the Netherlands one day be flooded with water? It takes courage to respond adequately to those changing circumstances and an effort to learn how to deal with such questions.

However, early in my career, I experienced that hardly anyone else shared my thoughts about the future because they were skeptical of the practitioners that translate the future: the futurists. Critics even questioned whether futurists were real professionals. For example, futurists were sometimes depicted as crystal ball gazers. This image is a relic from the past, as, until the Enlightenment, the future was the domain of prophets. The prophets were the connection between the divine and the human (Beerden, 2015). The prophets predicted the future as oracles and helped individuals make strategic choices. There was a certain amount of magic connected to foretelling the future. A crystal ball is a symbol of the same magic, but also of imagination and intuition.

The signal of skepticism was amplified when I became a teacher in 'futures studies' at the applied university Fontys. At open days of our institute, parents often asked me the implicit normative question: "what profession will be attainable for my child after completing this curriculum?" They wanted to know whether their child would be able to get a 'real' job after studying the future. As such, most parents seem to prefer a higher education degree that everyone understands right away and leads to a straightforward profession. This hesitance towards a training in becoming something as distinctive as a futurist, illustrates how dominant established professions are.

The aforementioned experiences motivated me to reflect upon my field of expertise: the future. My objective is to clarify what kind of professionals futurists actually are. With in-depth research into the translators of the future, I hope to contribute to the development of the future industry. And with that, I hope to contribute to a collective understanding of the importance of 'futures literacy'. Futures literacy means that we learn to speak the language of the future. The word 'literacy' is traditionally used to indicate that a language is mastered and fluently spoken. This term is also applied to all sorts of topics, for example to indicate whether someone knows the way digitally, i.e. whether this person is 'digitally literate'. In that spirit, I use the term literacy with respect to the future.

During my journey, I learned that not only outsiders but also experts in the sociology of professions had developed a view on the role of education (standardization is necessary) and what should be considered a profession. I realized how difficult it was – also for me – to let go of scholarly and societal views and think bigger. An example of such societal views is eloquent-

ly illustrated by Ricardo Semler in an episode of the Dutch documentary show 'Tegenlicht'; we live in boxes (our houses), work in boxes (in the flowchart of our company), and move in boxes (our cars or trains). He describes how ever-present those systems actually are by using the metaphor of a box. At the same time, Semler explained, we are expected to be creative too, and think outside of the box. But our social context does not provide us with the tools to do so.

I realized that Semler's box metaphor can also be applied to the societal notion of professions. The current representation of professions by scholars is 'boxed' in classic, yet for many unattainable, notions of prestige and status. Typically, prestige is achieved by theoretical knowledge, education, licensing and standardization. That raises the question: why focus on classic notions of professions when a large sum of young people today may not even practice anything like it? It is helpful to start formulating these kinds of new questions, as they may open new doors. Correspondingly, poet Mary Oliver demarcates between professions that make the world go round and professions that make the world go forward. She describes how we want a pilot to just follow the routine and let the flight be ordinary, preferably not extraordinary – just make the world go round. For creative work, Oliver (2016: 25 – 27) sees another task – make the world go forward:

In creative work — creative work of all kinds — those who are the world's working artists are not trying to help the world go round, but forward. Which is something altogether different from the ordinary. Such work does not refute the ordinary. It is, simply, something else. Its labor requires a different outlook — a different set of priorities.

Semler's notion of boxes and Mary Oliver's distinction of the ordinary and the extraordinary are clearly applicable to the case of futurists. Even they, as forward-looking practitioners, experience struggles with fitting in and are, in that sense, also 'boxed'. Over the past years, I observed how challenging it was for futurists to rethink their professionalization. At first glance, futurists made it seem as if they were professional castaways, unable to answer the question "are we a profession?". This was especially striking because futurists often help others rethink and imagine their possible futures. It was remarkable to uncover that practitioners with such a forward-looking mindset were having so much difficulty considering the possibility that their own way of professionalizing may have unfolded, and needs to unfold, in a non-standard way. This was a clear indication that the notions of archetypical professions are still so authoritative that it was challenging for futurists in the forefront of the professionalization debate to even consider alternative professionalization pathways.

Indeed, futurists obviously are not pilots, instead they deliver, what Oliver refers to as, creative work. Comparing futurists to pilots would be like confusing apples with pears. What I hope to bring across is that we need both pilots and poets, lawyers and futurists. These professionals do not replace each other. This also translates to the professionalization typologies: an alternative typology does not oppose the existing typology. They develop alongside each other. During the course of this study, I learned that advancing professionalization is not about overthrowing the old and introducing the new, it is about the willingness to see alternatives. Yet, recognizing alternatives can be a daunting task. Even futurists had a hard time appreciating their own alternative professionalization

pathway. This observation relates to Ricardo Semler's argument that people are constantly tempted to think in the dominant system, which makes it hard for them to think otherwise or see the magic of an unpaved path. Becoming Futurists has illustrated that futurists' activities to professionalize can be understood as an alternative professionalization pathway. Futurists are an example of what I coined a 'Type 2' profession, an alternative to the dominant pathway of professionalization. In retrospect, going back to my conversations with parents of potential students, I could have shared with parents that becoming a futurist is simply something else than they know, but just as valuable.

During my fieldwork, I observed how futurists share a particular way of looking at the world. They do not only share skills, but also a mindset. How do futurists describe their collective mindset? Open-minded, anti-disciplinary and growth-oriented, amongst other things. Futurists also appreciate their ability to unite analytical thought with intuition. Some futurists have described that their career as a futurist started with something as simple as 'wonder', by asking: "how could it be otherwise?" Journalist Krista Tippett eloquently wrote about wonder: "wondering is a useful way to begin to speak of a shared vocabulary of mystery we might embrace across our disciplines, our contrasting certainties, our doubts" (2016: 164). Wonder is a way to slow down, to distance ourselves from what we think we know, and to see the world for what it is today. Furthermore, wonder can help transcend disciplines, face complex issues and embrace uncertainty. Especially in combination with rational, analytical thought. Wonder implies no judgement, but a search for common ground.

The conversations among futurists about balancing intuition with analytical thought were not always

positive. Futurists have struggled to balance the two. From the outset, I noticed that methods serve futurists to help them validate their work, as proof that the future can be systematically studied. However, validation is only one part of the futurists' job. Daring to openly use intuition is the second; wishing they could rely more on their intuition but afraid of the implications (such as how their audiences will respond). As a consequence, scientific methods and data grew as the principle underpinning of futurists' work. This phenomenon is not only specific to futurists but also a struggle in other fields. For example, renowned botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer recalled the moment she recognized that she had approached her teachings as solely from a technical perspective; "I was teaching the names of plants but was ignoring their songs" (2013: 43). From that perspective, the methods and data used by futurists serve as a mere vehicle to help others speak the language of the future.

This observation reminds me of the work of eminent scholar Max Weber (2004/1917-1919), who observed in the early 1900s that bureaucracy evolved at a fast pace. Weber described how the process of rationalization helped Western countries to organize their societies. As a result, a highly developed bureaucracy is in place, in which there is a tendency to rely on validation, figures and models – predominantly rational and intellectual means. According to Weber this development had a cost; he coined it 'disenchantment'. Weber argued that problems were solved with technology, not with magic or faith. As a consequence, the inexplicable hardly had a (pronounced) role in societies. I interpret disenchantment as an invitation for futurists to reflect on the value of wonder, especially in the rationalized, scientific world we created over the years.

Someone who showed me how to wonder is the Dutch artist Thomas Trum. He creates artworks with paint as his muse. Trum paints with a super-sized felt pen, a machine for road line marking with brushes attached to a drill. In his work, I recognized Trum's ability to see alternatives. For example, Trum does not only see a machine that paints the familiar white traffic lines on the road, but also a giant paintbrush with endless possibilities. Trum reconfigured the meaning of a machine and presents us with an alternative outcome. The PhD thesis is wrapped in Thomas Trum's 'one yellow line 9' that he created in 2018 with gouache on paper. This artwork depicts my conviction that intuition and rationality go hand in hand. Trum uses the technology of the machine to create a very intuitive work. This can be compared to how futurists need their methods to imagine possible futures.

To conclude this valorization addendum, I come back to the initial question: what societal value does this study bring? With this PhD thesis, I acknowledge the value of questioning implicit societal beliefs. With 'implicit' I mean that it is considered common knowledge and that it is considered best to adapt what is deemed 'normal'. However, as Carl Jung once said: "to be normal is the ultimate aim of the unsuccessful" (1966: 161). The implicit belief – it is best to be normal – was challenged in two ways. The first involved futurists and their struggle to fit in. And the second questions how education is organized today.

From the outset, I observed the professionalization struggle of futurists and their wish to be taken seriously. As a consequence, futurists articulated the tendency to focus on validating their work. As an outsider observing their activities, I learned that their most

powerful contribution resides in creating meaningful conversations about the future. With the simple act of aiding conversations about the unknown, futurists have the opportunity to bring imagination to our thoroughly rationalized world. With an insightful conversation, it is possible to ease the mind of others and facilitate genuine interactions. And if futurists find more clarity about their professional role and purpose, they will be able to contribute in a more meaningful way. Futurists may be capable to guide an increasing amount of people in becoming future literate.

On a deeper level, I observed how the educational system as a whole remains calmly intact. Many young children are still being taught in a 20th century way. By rethinking the purpose of current education, it is possible to help new generations prepare for the pressing issues of this time, not of the past. Setting change in motion on a larger scale could be as simple as asking new questions. For example, by helping to rephrase the questions asked by parents. A fresh perspective can develop, just by formulating the initial question slightly different: "who can my child become?" Gently making parents aware of the norm of their original question ("what profession will be attainable for my child after completing this curriculum?"). The new questions may give more space for students to take ownership of their development and to advance skills to adapt to this rapidly changing world. They may be able to focus on their individual pathways, grow their problem-solving skills, demarcate important from urgent, and build courage to make difficult decisions. The new questions may also help students to see that they have all the time in the world to become wise, instead of hurrying into learning how to be smart.

To conclude this valorization, I return to a question that futurists like to ask: could it be otherwise?

With their professionalization pathway, they have answered their own question: yes, it can be otherwise. For futurists, their professionalization was an uncomfortable space of uncertainty; to me, it was a valuable source to yield new questions about professions. Futurists encouraged me to think outside of boxes. It helped me to see futurists for who they are: professionals that help the world move forward. As Ursula K. Le Guin timely wrote in 1997: "The dance of renewal, the dance that made the world, was always danced here at the edge of things, on the brink, on the foggy coast."

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