# TOWARDS THE EVOLUTIONS AND REVOLUTIONS IN FUTURE RESEARCH

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## INTRODUCTION

Paradigmatic changes within commercial industries call for a review of the needs and possibilities of futures research. Historical scientific developments of semiotics, social psychology and art criticism offer a platform to reconsider the role of the futures researcher in the context of change such as this. Underpinning this is the proposition that the exploration of the respective qualitative methodologies from the fields of Future Studies and Designers, in a truly multidisciplinary dialogue, might offer fruitful opportunities to sense, envision and validate possible futures and help to realize preferable ones. The questions addressed by this paper are:

• How can futures researchers investigate new fields of knowledge, where systemic and even epistemological change is happening?
• How can a participatory, co-creative response be triggered and optimized when the field of observation is that of envisioning possible futures?
• How can futures research rethink its approach and methodologies in the light of experiences and practices of other professional areas, namely design and journalism?

## RESEARCHER AS OBSERVER, FUTURES RESEARCHER AS POTENTIAL AGENT OF CHANGE

The speed of developments, like the shift from mass media to digital customization and/or in industries like the entertainment and media industry, calls for a review of the needs and possibilities of futures research. These developments are not merely technological but are paradigmatic changes with a systemic impact. In the light of these systemic changes, new visions for futures research seem required. These new visions draw upon refreshed views of past insights and recently emerged methods. Overall they support subjective participation and social network collaboration through insights from linguistic and semiotic sciences, psychology and art criticism. The science of semiotics (meaning of language, signs and symbols) and semantics (meaning in the language) and Action Research (learning by doing), offer insights into subjective participation in, as well as observation of, change. Social networking is developing, using technology such as Blogging and Wiki's, but more importantly with the shared notions of dialogue, meeting and sharing. The discussion starts, though, with a consideration of the very notion of systems behavior and intervention therein.

The issues at stake seem to be of various and complex nature:
• How can futures researchers investigate new fields of knowledge, where systemic and even epistemological change is happening?
• How can a participatory, co-creative response be triggered and optimized when the field of observation is that of envisioning possible futures?
• How can futures research rethink its approach and methodologies in the light of experiences and practices of other professional areas, namely design and journalism?

If we observe the field of electronics, the role of the technician in determining the outcome of a performance of a circuit is clear. Besides providing the actual measurement values, it is their task to define, quantify and make visible the intrinsic disturbance induced in the circuit by the presence of the measuring tool itself. Similarly any system that is subject to measurement or observation will be disturbed by the observation, potentially causing a system adaptation. This introduced "alteration" or "error" is considered a necessary side effect of the measurement process that has to be managed. Managing the effect of observation is applicable to other types of systems including that of futures research.

To help the exploration in this paper it is worth considering the different ways the study of possible futures could be approached. The exploration of the possible futures comes in different forms, including quantitative methods such as forecasting and some trend extrapolation, and qualitative methods such as scenario planning and trends interpretation. Exploring the future, however, also manifests itself in creative or speculative narrative forms of imaginative projection, such as literary science fiction. Quantitative and qualitative futures research methods are well known but the contribution of creativity and speculation is sometimes passed over by futures researchers.

Early adventurers in science fiction exemplify the use of storytelling as a futures research process. In the late 19th century, Jules Verne extrapolated emerging technologies of his era to bring their potential alive in his work *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* with its exploration of the potential for the undersea domain and electricity. Also in the late 19th century H.G. Wells was exploring more qualitatively by taking leaps of possibility as demonstrated in his works *The Time Machine and the War of the Worlds.* The latter work can also be interpreted as part social commentary on empire building and the clash of civilizations at different stages of scientific development.

In more recent times, William Gibson explored the trajectory of the consumer culture in his work *Pattern Recognition* with its intuitive trends researcher heroine. Gibson is a narrator of future worlds in the same league of Philips K. Dick but most notably engaged in the actionable description of pre-defining the future by inventing new words to describe it, for example *cyberpunk.* Neal Stephenson pushed nano-technology into view in his work *The Diamond Age* and in the same novel presented views of social fragmentation and advanced possibilities for user interfaces. In *The Nights Dawn Trilogy,* Peter F. Hamilton populates the vision of human civilization with provocative issues of sentient spaceships, galactic colonization and society split by the issue of physical and mental augmentation (including mind-to-mind networking). Interestingly Hamilton also broached spirituality by looking at the boundary between life and death that also occurs in works of fantasy. These works of fiction explore timeframes of the past, present, future and other worlds that may never be.

But can the science fiction author become truly engaged with the change provoked by their creative works? Among science fiction writers, Bruce Sterling aimed to do so in the 1990s, joining the lively debate in the design community and even delivering his vision of the role of design to achieve a more sustainable world in his *Green Viridian Manifesto* published by Creative Review in 1999.

Looking at other fields of creativity and cultural production beyond both literature and specific research, one can empathize with the magnitude of the challenges ahead of the research communities by studying the evolution of the role of the critic in contemporary art. A key change in the nature of the critics' role happened around the late 1960s in the field of aesthetics. At that time of deep societal change and cultural transformation, the role of the critic seemed to stop being that of the specialized advisor monitoring and validating cultural production

as an agent external to the creative process. Through the work of thinkers like Germano Celant, the art critic became embedded in the making of art ideology in first place, and openly *"militante"*, or *"taking part to"* / *"taking side within the context"* of the development of art. From observer to participant, from impersonal to biographical, from scientific to actionable, this role of art criticism characterized the next decade, down to the "invention" of whole new categories and movements of art by post-modern critics like Achille Bonito Oliva, widely credited for his role in defining the ideology, the positioning and the general cultural discourse of the "Transavanguardia" movement, starting from individual works by Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, and more, very different individual talents, that became unified in a vision, a movement and a commercial proposition at the same time.

What could be learnt by professional futures researchers from the fact that disciplines like literature and art critics demonstrated the ability to envision, and sometimes even to stimulate change towards a "preferable future"? Before answering this question, one should address the issue of how futures studies are currently taxonomically classified. Aside then from the schools of qualitative, quantitative and creative storytelling, how else can futures researchers be differentiated? A general way of distinguishing the exploration of the future is using the scope of preferred temporal view; from the short term of one to five years, mid term of five to twenty years and long term of twenty years plus. Futures research in the field of commercial applications seemingly tends to focus on the short term by the nature of the demands of short term ROI (Return On Investment) required by current managerial measurement systems that assess performance and project success. The more formal field of Future Studies tends towards mid to longer-term exploration. What is the difference? One could simplify it by stating that shorter-term exploration, due to the commercially driving interests, tends to be more narrowly focused and the longer-term taking a broader, macro view. Whilst these differentiations of futures exploration do not preclude discourse between the clusters of parties in the views of scope, it helps to understand the different general orientations and interests. After all, whatever the orientation, all these explorers envision and engage with possible futures that may unfold.

In futures exploration the envisioning effectively creates a systemic engagement with possible futures. Referring to the Integral Theory structure proposed by Ken Wilber, a system engagement occurs when a fully fleshed future recognises individual psychology and intent, collective cultural structures, individual behavior and physicality and finally collective societal structures. In a similar way to the measurement of a circuit discussed above, engagement with a possible future view will lead to a different future emerging through the introduction of an "alteration" or what some might consider a measurement "error". Distinguishing between "alteration" and an "error" is important. An error implies an unexpected effect whilst alteration might imply one that is expected and possibly even designed. Of course, a response to an "error" may also be designed, but in this case it is proposed to focus on the proactive, constructive opportunity rather than on "error" management. This means that engagement and intervention of the futures researcher in a system can be treated as an opportunity to stimulate change through a process. The first contribution to exploring this proposition comes from the history of social sciences and cultural studies.

In his 1976 book *Semiotique et sciences sociales,* Algirdas Julien Greimas outlined the elements of analysis to describe how issues related to social sciences impact the overall philosophy of science. The specific nature of social sciences, Greimas states, can be studied by analyzing the internal organization and the way linguistics, one of the disciplines in which semiotics is mostly rooted,

builds up its scientific status. Here the complex "system" of relationships at the heart of formal scientific research is complemented by the actual notion of research as a "process". Greimas deconstructs science into its semantic and semiotic levels: if science is not a rigid and static system but *the process* where meaning is created and validated, the role of the researcher might be associated to the role of the *man who, by simply speaking,* embodies the actionable but abstract potentiality of the *parole,* the act of speaking, into the actioned, living, concrete practice of the *langue,* language viewed as a system including grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, as defined by Ferdinand de Saussure. The analysis of linguistics and its formal scientific status offers rich opportunities to deconstruct the assumptions we have about social sciences.

One challenge at stake in the field of contemporary futures research is the same as that envisioned by Greimas for the social scientist; how can the futures researcher ensure that their analysis pertains to science and remains within scientific paradigms, although it is immersed in the flow of natural language? The answer seems to be a complex one and provokes exploration of how subjects, or *actants,* "the ones who perform the action as indicated in a verb", in Greimas' vocabulary, create the framework and abstract the foundation for a scientific discourse by means of linguistic, semiotic and ultimately communication strategies. This is a vision where science is looked upon indeed as *the process* generating various taxonomic systems and not the other way around. Here the role of the scientist and of the researcher in governing the *process* of *doing research* emerges as key.

Although possibly being the best formally documented, the semiotic approach is not the only way to explore participatory involvement of researchers in the research process. Action Research is a method of research based on the simple premise of learning by doing.

In her 1995 essay, Janet Masters identifies the roots of Action Research to movements like the UK-based Teacher – Researcher movement of the 1970s and the Experimentalist and Progressive educational work by John Dewey. Masters states these were those *"who applied the inductive scientific method of problem solving as a logic for the solution of problems in such fields as aesthetics, philosophy, psychology and education"* (1995, op. cit.). Thinkers like Kurt Lewin and critical social theorist Jurgen Habermas were also associated to the scientific milieu that contributed to the investigation of what Action Research is and what its scope and reach could be.

Masters (1995, op. cit.) captured some possible definitions to describe Action Research including the following, in which it is seen as a:

*"systemic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by participants in the inquiry"* (McCutcheon and Jung. 1990:148);

*"form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out"* (Kemmis and McTaggert, 1990:5);

*"a contribution both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework"* (Rapoport, 1970:499 as cited in McKernan, 1991:4).

Action Research appears to go well beyond the notion of observation and measurement, into the domain of envisioning and managing change towards better futures. Action Research can be thought of at three levels of scope and approach:

• Technical: single, measurable, fragmented, referring to natural sciences;
• Mutual-collaborative: multiple, constructed, holistic, referring to history and hermeneutics;

• Participatory: social, economic, dealing with issues of equity, referring to critical sciences.

Moving from general social sciences back to the specific field of futures studies, in his essay "The Emergence of Critical Futures" Jose M. Ramos outlines the genesis of Critical Future Studies as a theoretical approach encompassing and leveraging much of the theory developed by Habermas and the School of Frankfurt, among others. Even more interestingly, Ramos connects the scientific development of Critical Future Studies to the personal history and personal development of the renowned futurist Richard Slaughter.

Slaughters' personal journey through Future Studies began, as it has for many, as a young reader of creative science fiction. Upon completing training in education he took up a position in Bermuda. The travails of Bermuda, as it struggled to deal with the challenges of the 'footprint' of increased human contact, lead to a personal insight into the fragility of our, i.e. the world's, environment, and with it our society. From here Slaughter followed a path of inquiry into civilizational behavior and hence further study resulting in a PhD on 'Futures in Education' and then moving on to develop the notion of 'critical futures'.

As part of the development of Critical Future Studies, Slaughter proposed a taxonomy of four levels of Futures analysis in order to clarify the meaning of critical futures:

• Pop – Shallow, technology focused and conservative;
• Problem-oriented – Society focused issues, i.e. environment, population;
• Critical – Questioning the assumptions and worldviews that underlay a view of a possible future;
• Epistemological – Looking at deeper structures that affect the way people engage with the future.

While pursuing the expression of this taxonomic view of futures studies, the opportunity emerged to establish an institute of tertiary learning in Future Studies at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia. The program developed from Critical Studies to embrace Slaughters' next passionate view, or rather meta-view, on the field of Integral Futures. Integral Futures is the use of Integral Theory, as expounded by Ken Wilber, to provide breadth and depth in futures research that has not been previously seen. This is one of the leading edges of development in the field of Future Studies.

Whatever the perception of the value of the content of Richard Slaughters' work, his unfolding path itself is pertinent. His journey exemplifies the notion of futures research through thinking and through action. By engaging with possibilities of the future and acting by being informed by them, change has occurred within him that lead him to create change in the external world which will in turn create change in the future. Here the "error" – or definitely better defined as the "alteration" – also became an agent of change. This demonstrates a connection between the evolution of a scientific approach, which could be described as a taxonomic way to analyze the field of human futures, if we were adopting Greimas' vocabulary, with the maturing of a personal vision of Slaughter. The abstract, potential *langue,* or language system, of "critical futures" is now available as a potential, highly participatory *parole,* or way of speaking, for the rest of us. This comes after having to mature it into a formal system from personal intuitions and shared discussions within, but also at the edge of, the futures research community. What was opinion became science through a process – the process of articulating and formalizing one's sensibility into systemic knowledge for repeatable analysis and experience.

In order to further explore beyond the history and established theories of futures studies, this introduction has proposed that:

• Research and measurement in scientific fields are structured as systemic, taxonomic, regulated practices with formal protocols and specified boundaries;
• Social sciences appear to be a semiotic field of possibilities, where the *process* of making research potentially might be the key to *lead* to the development of a scientific system;
• The history of social and cultural research offers examples of how participation and intervention can deliver added value to the process, as seen in Action Research;
• The approach of participative, critical research can be leveraged in the field of futures research, namely through "critical futures" thinking;
• Within the work of Richard Slaughter, the emergence of individual visions and biographical developments has been deeply intertwined with action and the elaboration of scientific thinking.

As a preliminary conclusion, one can see that the role of creativity in the futures research field might be re-considered. It might be concluded that the level of opportunities offered by action-oriented participatory research and critical futures by far exceeds the dangers of potentially induced "alterations" which can turn into constructive opportunities from alteration in the system. It might be further argued that the fast changing nature of futures research fields implies a high degree of flexibility and acceptance of new methodologies and approaches. Ultimately, the conscious management of potential "errors" might transform imperfection into improvement, leading to a reframing of problems into opportunities.

In this challenging environment, the value of a network of peers, opinion leaders and leading thinkers might rise as one potential key success factor. This is because the actual systemic frame of reference for scientific explorations in quickly changing fields and domains is either in the process of being made, making, or re-made. Recalling Greimas, the *process* of entertaining a dialogue within the futures research community and the on-going discussion with leading experts, opinion formers and opinion makers is supportive of a truly co-creative process. Beyond co-creation, and perhaps even more crucial to futures research than the co-creative element, the necessary validation, optimization or even re-formulation of research conclusions can be performed in real time. This could be done using a "plan-do-check-evaluate" approach similar to the practices of ISO quality processes. Although the operation might be run with some modalities and tools equivalent to those supporting a design testing experiment or as a journalistic interview set, its scope reaches the level of possible abstraction towards methodological repeatability and/or futures research vision.

## THE DESIGNER AS A NEW KIND OF FUTURES EXPLORER

In the commercial world, futures exploration has predominantly been a practice of corporate departments, agencies and various design professionals. Over the last 15 years the practice of thinking about and envisioning possible futures has spread. From relationships with "guru" business external consultants to the creation of internal teams of futurologists, increasingly industrial conglomerates, multinationals and leading creative industry agencies have explored this field of knowledge both to identify opportunities for pragmatic business insight and to establish thought leadership.

As an industry leader, Philips always maintained a natural strategic focus on envisioning the future and its possibilities. The interest has ranged from technology through to societal change. The technology focus aligns with Philips' core business focus and has allowed the company to take significant

thought leadership, and thus business opportunity, from the light bulb to the leading edge in medical digital applications, systems and services. At the same time the technology focus gave insight to Philips to allow it to accommodate the paradigm shift from analogue to digital as evident from its groundbreaking work with the compact disk. Similarly the insights have allowed Philips to keep pace with the electronic evolution from radio-valves to transistors through to semiconductor chips. At the other end of the scale, through questioning emerging social issues, Philips has both crafted internal human resources policies and through this its external community relationships. It has been a practice since the early 1900s to anticipate changes in the social environment of its workers, their families and their communities and to support them in coping with this.

Within the Philips corporate portfolio, the design competence was established as early as the 1920s. Early manifestations of future-oriented projects include the 1958 World Fair pavilion, also known as "Le Poeme Electronique", created in collaboration with architect Le Corbusier and composers Xanakis and Varese as a concrete art hymn to the future. This project was strongly promoted and actuated by Louis Kalff, the leader of Philips Corporate Design department. Similar statements can be identified across the entire post-war history of Philips, from the Evoluon building in Eindhoven to the strongly Science Fiction flavored visualizations of "Wild Cat" design research projects by illustrator Syd Mead, consultant between 1970 and 1982 to Knut Yran, then head of Philips Corporate Design.

Yran initiated future explorations by means of multidisciplinary teams including designers, engineers and model-makers. Robert Blaich succeeded Yran and led the Philips corporate design function until 1991. It was the successor of Yran's successor, Stefano Marzano, who laid down the foundation of today's futures research at Philips Design, both by stimulating a greater multidisciplinary depth in the

team composition, and by leading the creation of structural programs like CultureScan, addressing short term trends, or sophisticated approaches like Strategic Futures, a consolidated methodology for business-related longer term explorations. Marzano defined his working approach as High Design, a vision and a process at the same time where design incorporates in its DNA social sciences, with the aim to anticipate on people's future needs and values. Several projects were delivered in the first 15 years of Marzano's tenure, from Workshop*, a collaboration with Olivetti to envision developments in the office space, to the most recent Next Simplicity, a design research manifesto interpreting the Philips brand promise through future-oriented working prototypes. The benchmark of Philips Design visionary projects is the 1995 "Vision of the Future", a collection of 60 concepts envisioning the world in 2005, as proven by the fact that in 2000, 60% of "Vision of the Future" concepts were concrete products, as assessed by McKinsey in a dedicated study.

In order to capture the essence of futures research at Philips Design, one can select a few of its key characteristics:

• Multidisciplinary approach-based, not only in integrating human sciences into design, but also stimulating cultural researchers to work on concepts in truly cross-disciplinary enrichment, both ways;
• Action-orientation, perhaps due to its nature of design activity and its collocation in a corporate department, futures research naturally blends into innovation design and concept development;
• Preferable-futures focused, in order to leverage its nature of corporate agent to trigger, enable and support the most preferable developments meeting people's future values and needs, both regional and global.

The High Design approach has led over the years to the identification and the formalization of the notion of "multipurpose strategy", identifying benefits from

this approach to futures envisioning for the business processes across corporate divisions. But the heart of the multipurpose strategy is the idea that the creation of a vision of a preferable future cannot be confined to the "ivory tower" of specialist circles. Taking the concepts and ideas at the heart of such vision, the outside of the Philips Design organization where it was first created has always been a necessity. This is because the socialization of the ideas offers opportunities to:

• Receive feedback, validate assumptions and thus fine-tune strategies, based on the impressions of both people and industry specialists;
• Engage in a dialogue with opinion leaders and media, generating a positive return in terms of being seen as taking thought leadership;
• Stimulating potential partners to join in the next iterations of research as knowledge experts and building cross-industry alliances.

The ambition to translate vision into reality is ultimately the DNA of Philips Design trend practice, with its original "manifesto", *Flying over Las Vegas,* written by Marzano as early as 1991. As an example of how a vision can grow into a formalized and repeatable approach, one can describe the path from idea to concept to the established design service of the Ambient Experience proposition. Ambient Experience design is defined as the holistic, people focused approach to the creation and delivery of solutions integrating high technology and architecture into responsive, anticipatory environments. Ambient Experience Design marks a new milestone in the challenge of designers to integrate new high tech in the human context. Designers need to learn how to leverage new assets from sensorial applications like RFID tagging and Near Field Communication to nanotechnologies, to engineer them into smart environments anticipating and delivering functionalities according to people's needs, respecting cultural values and meeting individual expectations.

The notion of Ambient Experience was born through a number of iterations including the following examples:

• Noah's Ark design research exploration, including the "Nebula" concept for a bedroom of the future, where the environment acts as a digital medium (2000).
• Identification and description of the Ambient Intelligence vision, framing technology of 2020 into the idea of pervasive, seamless, anticipatory applications in space (2001).
• "Nebula" selected as manifesto concept to illustrate the Philips Ambient Intelligence vision of the future at Las Vegas CES (2002).
• Publication of the thought leadership book *The New Everyday,* jointly created by Philips Research and Philips Design, to formalize the scope of the Ambient Intelligence vision (2003)
• Creation of prototypes and concrete solutions of Ambient Experience, the design approach to enable ambient intelligence, in U.S. hospitals (2004).
• IDSA Gold Award for Ambient Experience hospitals, and creation of a dedicated design service within Philips Design to further deliver AED solutions (2005).

In each of the above, the ability to sense and respond to the discussion across networks of journalists, experts and opinion leaders was crucial. Of equal importance was people research as described in the 2005 paper by Lucile Rameckers and Stefanie Un, "People insights at the fuzzy front of innovation", and of the 2005 paper by Brechje Vissers, "From aesthetic trends to value signs".

In this last paper, the practice of triggering, forming and maintaining networks of experts and peers was introduced as one of the working tools of trends research at Philips Design.

## A TREND RESEARCH CASE HISTORY: FROM NEW AWARENESS TO DIGITAL RELATIONSHIPS

The Philips Design positioning paper "From New Awareness to Digital Relationships" reports hypothesis, findings and tools of a number of converging explorations in the areas of media (from mass media to customized, digital applications and interfaces), advertising (from mass marketing to digital relationships) and experience design (to be identified as the approach to shift from classic marketing approaches towards truly integrated communication).

The exploration of this particular field of future experiences presented a number of challenges:

• How to tackle a content domain, from mass media to advertising, outside of the traditional competence portfolio of Philips Design?
• How to seize futures research opportunities in a time of fast paced change in real time, adjusting and presenting the new research outcomes?
• How to engage in a dialogue with protagonists of these fields and establish relationships that would last beyond the project?

As further background, since 2003 Philips Design has conducted exploration about the future of advertising which has been marked by the following milestones:

• Initiation of the "Understanding Digital Experience" new solutions development program (2001).
• Creation of a dedicated program sub-project about envisioning future developments from mass media to digital experiences (2002).
• Initiation of a number of workshops and sessions with media industry leaders, with W+K advertising agency of Amsterdam acting as key partners (2003).
• Presentation and validation of early findings and of sketched tools for further analysis through a worldwide network of peers, opinion makers and industry leaders (2004).

• Positioning paper publishing and presentation at Corporate Research Exhibition in Eindhoven, public exposure through media relations for further validation (2005).

In the production of the project positioning paper a number of assets were matured within Philips Design including:

• Trends content: in the shift from mass media to digital futures, three key directions for post-advertising communication and media (labeled as "Advertiser Entertainment", "Contextual Immersion" and "Transformation Engines") were identified and described along with their potential sub-clusters;
• Tools for analysis and planning, co-created by a team including both Philips Design trend researchers and designers and W+K media planning and strategic planning directors. This set of tools can support both analysis of existing brand manifestations and planning for the experience design direction of new brands and/or campaigns;
• Expert and opinion leaders network, with 75 interviews and presentations conducted worldwide, in a richly textured dialogue with protagonists in key industries and media.

For the purpose of this ESOMAR paper, this last asset, the social networking aspect, will be further expounded upon as an area of particularly valuable, potential development for futures research. The creation of an expert network around the specific research questions (what is the future of media from mass to digital? what is the future of advertising from mass marketing to experience design?) allowed a constant appraisal and re-negotiation of the boundaries of expertise necessary to involve in the discussion.

The selection of W+K as research partner in 2003 was determined by a specific choice: instead of contracting external trend analysts from the market of futures studies agencies, Philips Design decided to involve in the experiment one of the agencies universally rated as "makers of the future" in the industry.

This represented an important shift of perspective from investing in external observers who *analyze* the field as a system, to taking direct responsibility of an exploratory process with the help of leaders *acting* in the field.

The choice of contributors to the network discussions was not cast in stone at the beginning of the research project. On the contrary, the nature of network contributors has grown over time based on organic, lively referrals. Here follows an extract from the final list of industries and domains involved through eight clusters of their representative experts that formed the network, reproduced here to give a flavor of the qualities of the scope of the network and its reach:

• Research agencies, researchers and practice leaders working in trend research were involved in the discussion, both at the beginning and at the end of the process, as peers. This first short list included classic research agencies like TNS (Stoyan Kamburow), established retail analysts like GDR (Kate Ancketill) and upcoming, start up new realities, like Red Network, based in the United States and China, with focus on Asia Pacific (Lisa Yong);
• Press, blogs and media were sensed as being key respondents in the discussion. This was to ensure that the research focus remained attuned to the key changes in the field of observation through iterative loops. The dialogue here involved both leading trade publications like Shots (Jordan McGarry) and highly influential weblogs like adrants.com (Steve Hall), without forgetting trendsetting publications like Business 2.0 (Josh Quittner);
• Entertainment industry, including TV production companies, is a cluster of participants that has delivered important counterintuitive insights, with contributions from the likes of Gary Carter (SVP for Idols worldwide at Freemantlemedia);
• Advertising and communication agencies were at the heart of this research, and co-participated, beyond the partnership with W+K in 2003. Discussions took place at major networks like

DDB Amsterdam, JWT Amsterdam or BBDO Germany headquarters in Duesseldorf including an exchange of opinions with smaller companies in the PR and communication field, like 515 of Turin (Maddalena Zolino) or in the retail design world, like SVT of Amsterdam (Michel van Tongeren);
• Design agencies, considered in some cases as peers to Philips Design from a pure design viewpoint, were not forgotten. This delivered feedback from the angle of commercial interior design with a view (Ron Pompei at Pompei AD), of innovation processes applied to retail concepts (IDEO) and of specifically digital communication (Clockwork of Amsterdam);
• To complete the review of trends in digital design, high tech companies and start ups were invited to join the network, in one of the richest clusters of this research. This included Philips peers like Sony, Motorola and MSN, and young enterprises like PushTVi, Fun2Phone, YDreams, IceMobile and Mobix Interactive, pioneers at the heart of the media revolution;
• Major clients to the media and advertising industries were not be left out of the equation and opportunities were taken to speak with Ahold, FIAT and more;
• Academic experts, from Kay Muehllman at the International Institute of Journalism of Krems to Guido Guerzoni of the Bocconi Business School, and cultural institutions, from Premsela, the Dutch Design Foundation (Dingeman Kuilman) to art foundations completed the mix of networking assets created throughout the project, between March 2003 and December 2004.

The nature of discussions and of the dialogue entertained with each stakeholder reflected the formal qualities of a journalistic approach. The discussions incorporated elements of stage performance to periodically present the research hypothesis under review. In each case there was always a formal research questionnaire as a reference to guide the researcher through the conversations. The existence of the questionnaire was, however, not explicitly communicated to flexibly ensure the

maximum span of content opportunities in each and every discussion. Opting for an informal approach maximized the potential for richer content emerging rather than using a restrictive mechanistic one.

The token of appreciation for the knowledge exchange was mostly knowledge itself, and the possibility to maintain the dialogue over time. This resulted in several opportunities for further discussion, both in the area of the specific study and in new areas of converging interest. Each contributor to the network was treated as what Malcom Gladwell defined in his groundbreaking *The Tipping Point* as "Maven" (a knowledge intense node in a networking structure). Using another of Gladwell's definitions, several participants acted and reacted over time as "Connectors" (those agents multiplying the reach of single contributors by linking people to each other).

At the beginning of this chapter, three sub-questions in the context of the general issues addressed within this paper were raised to which answers can now be supplied after description and demonstration above:

*Question:* How to tackle a content domain, from mass media to advertising, outside of the traditional competence portfolio of Philips Design?

*Answer:* By involving a research partner consulting from a position of leadership in the related industry: not asking the system analysts to report, but to the inspired doers to co-own the process;

*Question:* How to seize futures research opportunities in a time of fast paced change in real time, adjusting and presenting the new research outcomes?

*Answer:* By involving a wide range of experts and opinion leaders in recurring loops of fine tuning discussions, validating early hypothesis through informal and flexible dialogue;

*Question:* How to engage in a dialogue with protagonists of these fields and establish relationships that would last beyond the project?

*Answer:* By taking responsibility for knowledge sharing even with competitors, meeting the challenge of company confidentiality while triggering true dialogue through open discussions.

As a last consideration, one should add that the real challenge is not so much in the creation of a relatively wide wealth of networking assets but in the medium term maintenance of the relationships beyond the project boundaries. Here the ability to re-think opportunities and introduce experts to new areas of research is essential in ensuring that the gained intimacy does not elapse over time. The need to nurture such stability in the network is essential to be able to rely on a true asset for further futures explorations. As has been proven in these future explorations, the true value is derived from constantly refreshing and reformulating the connections among topics, among experts and between research and action.

## CONCLUSION: EMBEDDING NETWORKING ASSETS INTO NEW DESIGN SERVICES, TOWARDS NEW APPROACHES TO FUTURES RESEARCH

The nature of social networks is to either remain alive through expansion or to ultimately dissolve back into its individual units. It was therefore important to follow up in 2005 with the implementation of the findings into concrete design delivery projects. This was done with the ambition of identifying specific areas where this approach to futures research might further evolve as an asset.

The first opportunity for a design delivery came about when one of the Philips divisions enquired of Philips Design about repositioning one of their newly developed propositions from their traditional domain of mass market towards more profitable luxury markets. A dedicated system solution was developed, complemented by trend research validated prototypes assembled in a dedicated application center. The challenge here was to work with the division to envision the future of luxury in specific categories and markets.

At the same time the project sought to expose opinion leaders and decision-makers in the luxury industry to the newly developed ideas.

There were dual objectives for the categories of retail and hospitality categories; firstly, to anticipate developments in the luxury industry and, secondly, to fine-tune the specific design proposition. Pursuing these objectives led to a number of carefully orchestrated sessions with leaders in the field. These sessions were complemented with more informal meetings with analysts, press and other opinion makers. As a marketing action, this activity was part of a bigger plan of presence at industry milestone events. As a futures research project, this gave the opportunity to perform actionable testing of assumptions and hypotheses in the fast paced changing cluster of categories in the luxury industry and its European and North American markets.

From this pragmatic experience in a client project, a more structured appraisal of the relevance of networking in the field of trends research could be performed and its results could be shared at management level. This led to a potential integration of a more flexible, networking-based approach to short-term trends research in the context of the Ambient Experience Design, the newly established practice within Philips Design service portfolio described above. One might conclude that a new design service in its launch phase is the ideal milieu to work towards new developments in a research practice. After all, flexibility and experimentation in research design are in high demand during the specific time of portfolio development. But there might be more to this quest towards experimenting. The current trend research industry-wide spiral towards trends content commoditization, with analysis becoming a trigger for consulting services or editorial subscriptions, will call for new ways to aggregate sources, exchange insights and define general directions for research. In this context, the "networking opportunity" might provide a

minimal but actionable paradigm shift, resulting in the amplification and leverage of researcher-to-expert and/or peer-to-peer level of inter-industry, interdisciplinary dialogue.

In conclusion, how would a new, design-influenced, networking oriented approach attempt an answer to the three key questions underpinning this paper in the introduction?

*Question:* How can futures researchers investigate new fields of knowledge, where systemic change of epistemic nature is in the process of unfolding?

*Answer:* By adopting an action-oriented approach, working in truly multidisciplinary mode with experts and leaders from other fields.

*Question:* How can a participatory, co-creative response be triggered and optimized when the field of observation is that of envisioning possible future studies?

*Answer:* By developing the capability to integrate elements of other disciplines into the key processes and designs regulating the research in order to push beyond the epistemic status quo.

*Question:* How can futures research rethink its approach and methodologies in the light of experiences and practices of other professional areas, namely design and journalism?

*Answer:* By capturing the essence of potential assets in those fields, experimenting and adopting new approaches beyond existing dogmas, embracing potential "errors" as "alterations" in the field of research, to be managed as opportunities.

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