

2016 Conference Transcription

Date	Friday 1 April, 2016
Session Title	Community
Session Time	14:00 - 16:00
Moderator	Dan Vernon
Speakers	Madeline Ashby
Notes	n/a

Intro	<p>Hello and welcome to FutureEverything 2016 Festival Podcast Series. Over two days, in Manchester's iconic Town Hall, we task designers, artists, scientists, and many more, to rethink our resources from life, earth and intelligence, to community and uncertainty, our speakers ask what we might need less, and more of, in in our new future.</p> <p>How can we use optimism as a resource and do we need more or less dystopia? In this session on Community, we heard from science fiction writer and futurist Madeline Ashby, who writes narratives that look at the underbelly of our potential future. Madeline has written narratives for the likes of Intel, the Institute for the Future, Nesta and Science Journal Nature, with her novel vN named by io9 as the most messed up book about robot consciousness ever.</p>
Madeline Ashby	<p>First, I want to thank you. Thanks to Future Everything for inviting me. I have watched this event on Twitter for years and it is so much better in person. I had every right to be jealous when I was observing it from the outside. So thanks for having me here. I really appreciate it.</p> <p>I'm going to start by telling you a story, because I'm a science fiction writer, so I get to do that. A few years ago, a friend and I spent the day at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, which is where I live, and we were looking at dinosaurs and gemstones. He had brought his daughter, who was in kindergarten at the time, and for some reason, I don't remember why, but she asked her dad what the word successful meant. I can't recall how the word came up in conversation, or if he was reading out the copy related to the exhibit we were viewing, but he said to her that being successful meant working hard, making a good living, and being financially well-off. After a moment, I told her that while her dad was also correct in context, being successful also meant achieving whatever it was that you set out to do. Accomplishing a goal that you had set for yourself, no matter what the goal happened to be, big or small. So I want you to keep that story in mind as we discuss the future of optimism.</p>

I stand before you today as a science fiction writer, and as someone who does what is commonly called strategic foresight or futurism. I have a Masters in design with a focus on strategic foresight and innovation, and I've worked as a freelance futurist since 2011. I've also written four science fiction novels in that time, my third is due out in May. Further, I stand before you as someone who identifies as a woman doing those things, which should really be the only evidence you need about whatever optimism I might possess.

So here's how my job works. I get a ping from someone who wants me to write a story about the future of a particular thing. It might be intelligent systems. It might be urban warfare. It might be a world without antibiotics, shout out to Nesta. It might also be the future of a technology and development, whether it's a platform or a wearable, or the capacities of a chip set, or whatever. Either way, I get access to public or proprietary information and I write a story about it. Sometimes that story gets used as part of promotional material, sometimes it is part of a workshop. Sometimes it's there to give engineers and designers a different way to think about whatever it is that they're building. This practice is referred to in a couple of different ways. Brian David Johnson, at Intel, calls it science fiction prototyping. A more traditional corporate foresight strategist would call it narrative based scenario development. Either way, it's a form of back casting. You envision a particular future and then you work backwards from there to determine how to make it a reality, or how to avoid making it real. It's a powerful technic in part, because it scales really well. You can use it in a room with hundreds of people with sharpies and sticky notes, or you can use it in conversation with the people closest to you.

Before my husband and I committed to our relationship, I asked him to imagine the future he wanted with me, and he mentioned being married, having two cats, living in the city and writing books. Now we're married, we have two cats, we live on a subway line and we just co-edited our first anthology last year. So as Worldchanging Founder, Alex Steffen has been saying lately, you can't build what you can't imagine.

Some of the time I get asked to imagine the worst possible outcome of a technology, and some of the time I am asked to just write whatever I like. The most significant trend that I've noticed is a request for one of two things: an explicitly optimistic story; or two stories, one optimistic and one pessimistic. Often these are referred to as the utopian story and the dystopian story. Coincidentally, there's an ongoing debate in the science fiction community about the need for optimistic science fiction. I participated in two optimistic science fiction anthologies, one is the Shine: An Anthology of Optimistic SF, edited by Jetse de Vries and published in 2010. The other is Hieroglyph: Stories and Visions for a Better Future, edited by Kathryn Cramer and Ed Finn, published in 2014. This latter was inspired by a plea from Neal Stephenson for stories about getting big stuff done.

In a 2011 speech, Stephenson decried the slacking pace of technological innovation at a foresight conference, and was told by the President of Arizona State University, Michael Crow, that a portion of the blame lay with science fiction authors that we were not dreaming big enough, that we were seduced by

the temptations of dystopian fiction. There is some merit to this criticism, dystopias are hot. Any genre of fiction that is irrevocably associated with Jennifer Lawrence is going to be hot. From a purely mercenary perspective, dystopias are more marketable than utopias. They sell better. Moreover, dystopias are the sites of conflict, and conflict is at the route of drama, at least it's at the route of melodrama. A better writer than I am once said that melodrama is the story of right versus wrong, drama is the story of right versus right. Dystopias are diverse in all the ways that utopias are not. Utopian visions tend to be the same, no matter what country you're from, or what century you're in. The promise at the end of every happily ever after is mostly the same; true love, personal autonomy, chicken in every pot. It's satisfying, but from a dramatists perspective, it's awfully boring. Dystopias are by far more fun to write.

But here's the thing, for some people, dystopian fiction like the Hunger Games, or even Nineteen Eighty Four, or We is a distant but visible projection not unlike the Zombie apocalypse in the Walking Dead. It's theoretically possible, but so is the Zombie apocalypse, or an alien invasion, or time travel. But for other people, for the people of colour in Ferguson Missouri or the trans people of North Carolina, or Muslims basically everywhere, the dystopia is real, because the nostalgia for utopia is the constant boomer winging about the jetpacks they were promised. It's nostalgia for a time before the largest wealth gap in a century, and it's also nostalgia for a time when women were stuck at home and all genders were stuck in the closet. The people who complain about the abundance of dystopias are usually the people who have benefitted from their existence. When we insist on utopian narratives to the exclusion of all others, we [inaudible 08:08] the lived experience of the dystopia on the ground in real life. Optimism is not politically neutral, and frankly, it's easier to be hopeful when your hope has consistently been rewarded.

If you were on what John Scopes calls the lowest difficulty setting in terms of privilege, you might be more inclined to think that the world is a naturally nicer place than it actually is to other people. If you'll permit me a very American metaphor, even though I live in Toronto now, 'just because you were born on third base doesn't mean you hit a triple'. Writing about black historiography, Ta-Nehisi Coates said, 'I think that a writer wedded to hope is ultimately divorced from truth. Two creeds can't occupy the same place at the same time. If your writing must be hopeful, then there's only room for the kind of evidence which verifies your premise. The practise of history can't help there. Thus, writers who commit themselves to only writing hopeful things are committing themselves to the ahistorical, to the mythical, to the hagiography of humanity itself.' Later that same year, writing about hope in art, Coates says that hope for hope's sake is the enemy of intelligence.

This debate about the merit of optimism is nothing new. It's actually at the core of seventeenth century rationalist philosophy. Mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnez, in developing what he called symbolic logic, and what we now refer to as calculus, theorised that we are living in the best of all possible worlds. Rather than relying on observable and empirical evidence of causality as Newton did, Leibnez thought that we could intuit our position in the physical and moral

universal based on logic and rules. Applying this method, Leibnez arrived at the conclusion that our world was framed by a perfect creator who allowed the least possible amount of evil inside. Oddly, no one really thought to ask women what they thought of this ideal, or slaves, or the poor, or basically anyone who wasn't part of the Parisian salon crowd, or similar crowds in Europe.

Later, among that same crowd though, Voltaire thought so little of Leibnez's position, that in 1759, he published *Candide or Optimism* as a satirical attack on it. In it, a professor by the name of Pangloss, blithely ignores the suffering of those around him, claiming that we live in the best of all possible worlds. By the way, if you think you've heard that sequence of words before, it's because you have. Who said this? Tell me this. 'The optimist believes that this is the best of all possible worlds, the pessimist fears that this is true'. One of you have to know this. None of you know this? You know this because the answer is Oppenheimer.

So is optimism bad? Should we, as Dante inscribed on the gate of the inferno, abandon all hope? Certainly, optimism is good for us physically. In a 2007 meta-analysis of eighty three other studies, researchers found that optimism and physical health are co-related. Hopeful people live longer, are less likely to die of cardiovascular disease, have better outcomes following surgery, and crucially, feel less pain. Think about that. Optimistic people feel less pain, which is really nice for them [laughter]. From a neurological standpoint, optimism may have less to do with any conscious philosophical approach, and more to do with which hand you write with. A 2013 article in the *Journal of Experimental Neurobiology* locates the centres of fear and anxiety about the future in the right hemisphere of the brain. Apparently, sinister people have sinister ideas about the future, not least because the world, which is quite literally designed for right handed people, has been punishing them their whole lives.

Further in the 1980's, Alloy and Abrahamson found that people suffering clinical depression actually made better and more accurate logical inferences regarding things like cause and effect, which is how we determine optimism. This depressive realism even shows up on fMRI scans. Why? Because whether you feel optimistic or pessimistic about a situation is determined, not always by culture, or nurturing, or philosophy, it's also a dependent on whether your brain can effectively attribute effects to causes. In a 2012 study, researchers in Germany found that the frontal limbic coupling was diminished during the process of attribution. So attribution of tasks, attribution of responsibility, attribution of cause and effect in patients diagnosed with depression. Conversely, the patients in the control group who exhibited no signs of depression, did exhibit signs of optimism bias. So while it's true that depression lies, it doesn't mean that depressed people are liars.

Beyond the physical and psychological, optimism has long been seen as a key ingredient in social change. In 'Rules for Radicals', activist Saul Alinsky says that optimism brings with it hope, a future with a purpose, and therefore, a will to fight for a better world. Without this optimism there is no reason to carry on. Historian and activist, Howard Zinn, says to be hopeful in bad times is based on the fact that human history is not only of cruelty but also of compassion,

sacrifice, courage, kindness. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places where people have behaved magnificently this gives us the energy to act.

My friend Cory Doctorow, discussing his own activism, recently wrote hope is where you tread water if your ship sinks in the open sea, not because you have any real chance of being picked up, but because everyone who was picked up kicked until the rescue came. The people with the most to gain often must be the most optimistic. Although optimism is easier for people in positions of privilege, it's not always co-related to privilege. In fact, wealth is co-related with feelings of anxiety and passim. In a 2014 peer research study, people in countries with emerging or developing economies were more optimistic on the whole than people in wealthy countries. It is better to have something to work for than something to lose. The moment you have something to lose you start to get extremely paranoid about losing it, but you don't need me to tell you that, because this is England.

This is not say that people who feel hopeless are incapable of making change, or doing good, or that they cannot have positive visions of the future. In 1835, when he was still living in New Salem, Illinois, Abraham Lincoln was on suicide watch by members of his village. By 1841, he had submitted to the care of a doctor and had asked friends to remove all sharp implements from his home. His melancholy was seen, not as a character flaw, or an emotional weakness, but rather a burden of his genius. For as much as optimism was an article of faith amongst the thinkers of the seventeenth century, those of the nineteenth viewed sadness as a consequence of wisdom. Lincoln wrote poems about suicide and took frequent walks alone in the woods with his gun. Later it was this seriousness that won over public opinion over to his side during the now famous debates on slavery with Douglas. Despite his successes, he remained guarded and cautious in his approach to the future. In his second inaugural address, just a month before his assassination, he wrote 'with high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.'

What is futurism, but a kind of defensive pessimism? This is also a theory of cognition from the 1980s. Defensive pessimism is the idea that people with anxiety constantly prefigure or imagine negative or even disastrous scenarios in order to avoid or prevent them. In psychology, this is called pre-factual thinking. In studies, people who engage in pre-factual thinking, people who imagine scenarios of failure and work to prevent them perform just as well on tasks as people who optimistically expect themselves to do well. But the key difference is that the people who engage in defensive pessimism have a constant drive to do better on the next task, because what is pre-factual thinking? It's really just strategic planning. In the field of strategic planning, optimism has its limits and imagining negative scenarios has value.

An article in the Harvard Business Review focused on this with authors Level and Conman saying 'when forecasting the outcomes of risky projects, executives all too easily fall victim to what psychologists call the planning fallacy'. In its grip, managers make decisions based on delusional optimism rather than on a rational weighting of gains, losses and probabilities. They

overestimate the benefits and underestimate costs. They spin scenarios of success, while overlooking the potential for mistakes and miscalculations. As a result, managers pursue initiatives that are unlikely to come in on budget or on time, or to ever deliver the expected returns. Level and Conman published this article in July 2003. America was still riding high on mortgage [inaudible 17:43] derivatives at the time and it had just marched with significant aid and investment from allied nations into war.

I mention this, because strategic planning as a discipline emerge from war and war gaming. In war gaming, being pessimistic or simply accepting that there might be a negative outcome, is not only desirable, but necessary. It's not seen as being too negative, or bringing everybody down, or surrendering your dreams, or going off message; it's how you save lives and resources. While it is true that optimism is a key ingredient in the process of making change, hope is not the only emotion involved. There is also rage. There is also fear. These are powerful catalysts that are just as important in creating change as any sense of hope. The sweeping social changes we've seen over the last thirty years didn't happen because people felt good, or even in the last century, those didn't happen because people necessarily felt so great. We didn't avoid a failsafe scenario with nuclear weapons because we believed that the worst couldn't possibly happen. We didn't close the hole in the ozone layer, or develop retro viral drugs to combat the progress of HIV, or vaccines against measles, polo and HBV, because we didn't see the potential for disaster. We developed solutions to those problems because we are the apex predator of this planet and we saw a threat and we annihilated it.

To reference the story I told earlier, success is nothing more than accomplishing a goal. It is realising a desire. Desire, as we all know, doesn't always feel good. Desire, in fact, is at the route of despair. The dynamic that has the power to change the future is not optimism versus pessimism, or utopia versus dystopia, it is desire versus despair. The truth is that your utopia is someone else's dystopia already. The only reason people worry about the popularity of dystopia, is because they're worried that someday this dystopia will happen to them. The theme of this gathering is less and more, and it's important to recognise that hope is a resource, and that it is a resource that is not available to everyone. For some optimism is a luxury that they can't afford. The pessimists around you are not trying to bring you down or criticise your idea, they are trying to share an experience with you. That experience is the spectrum of reality. I'm not critical of optimism or an advocate of pessimism, but I do think that binaries of all kinds are ultimately poisonous to meaningful discourse. Pushing our scenarios to polarities will only polarise our visions of the future and that is not how we facilitate discussion, that is not how we invite engagement, and that is not how we create change.

So the next time someone asks you for an optimistic scenario, simply ask optimistic for whom? Is it optimistic for your company or optimistic for your customer? Is optimistic for your bottom line or optimistic for your industry as a whole? Is optimistic for your government or optimistic for your community? Because it's hard to sell cars to people without jobs, it's hard to sell a three bedroom dream home in the suburbs to people who can't afford to have

	<p>children. If you want to speed innovation, give people the security with which to experiment. If you want world changing ideas, give venture capital to people who have no social capital. The most harmful idea in this world is that change is impossible, but negative change is just as possible as positive change. In fact, it is equally likely. As Octavia Butler said, the only lasting truth is change.</p> <p>So here's what I'm interested in, and someone please point me to the grant that will help me figure this out. Does optimism actually lead to better strategy? Does hope create better, more advantageous decision making? How can we know, without turning these things over time? I think it's important that when we enter a new project, or we decide something, we don't just think about it but we feel about it. What you notice that you do a lot of work that I do, when you're standing in front of a crowd of people who are slumped in their chairs and you have the sticky notes, and the sharpies, and the easels, and whatever. What you realise that you're doing in foresight is a lot of corporate therapy, because you are asking people about their hopes and dreams and anxieties and fears about the future. Those are all emotionally loaded conversations. There's a huge amount of emotional labour here. When you find those things out, you discover what people's visions of the future really are. Then you also get a lot of self-censoring because you get people saying 'I don't want to sound pessimistic', 'I don't want to sound too airy fairy', 'I don't want to sound too much, too this, too that'. Getting the honest opinion though, means drilling into their feelings, which is really, really difficult. But once you get there, you tap this vein of creativity and these veins of solutions to problems. People know how to help themselves. You just have to ask them.</p> <p>So I think the problem that I keep seeing is that we have the potential to destroy discourse about the future by forcing it into these emotional boxes, and sorting good emotions from bad emotions. That isn't helpful. We can accomplish a lot of change simply by acknowledging that we are afraid of something, or that we are despairing of something. It's an incredible liberating moment when you realise that the process towards change is sometimes going to suck and not always feel great. You can acknowledge, hey, this isn't going to be the greatest all the time, but we have to do it. Once you acknowledge that, you're free to move on and do whatever it is that you need to do in order to create that change.</p> <p>So I guess what I'm really, really, really interested in is optimism is good for us physically, mentally, and good for our communities, it draws us together and helps us get things done. What I want to know is, does it actually make us better strategists?</p>
<p>Outro</p>	<p>We hope you enjoyed Madeline's talk and thanks for listening. You can hear the rest of the talks of 2016 at futureeverything.org/2016podcasts.</p>

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