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Book Review

***Futures Research Methodology* Version 2.0**

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reviewed by Jay Herson

Jerome C. Glenn and Theodore J. Gordon have updated their earlier work to compile an 843 page, 27-chapter CD presenting a much-needed “encyclopedia” of the state-of-the-art of futures research methodology. The CD contains both .PDF and .DOC formats. Each chapter represents a method – e.g. Delphi methods, futures wheel, cross-impact analysis, technology sequence analysis. The chapters average 30 pages in length and are written by the people who developed the methodology – Glenn and Gordon themselves, Joe Coates, Harold A. Linstone, Alan Porter, etc.

The editors have organized each chapter by History, Description of the Method, How to Do It, Strengths and Weaknesses of the Method, Frontiers of the Method, Samples of Applications and Bibliography. This ensures that the reader will get a good description of each method and find sources of further information. Each chapter is called a module and is independent of all other chapters. Thus, the reader need not read chapters 1 through 5 in order to be able to comprehend chapter 6 as would be the case in a textbook. The only drawback in use of this CD as a valuable reference is that the extensive bibliography that accompanies each chapter is current only to 1994. Readers must wait for version 2.1 for the updated bibliography.

The introductory chapter is a “must read” for people new to the field as well as a good orientation for more experienced readers. The chapter makes a distinction between futures research (decision oriented, drivers and scenarios) and future studies (subject oriented, what are the new technologies in energy, medicine; new trends in entertainment, education). Forecasting is dichotomized into normative (what future do we want) and exploratory (what futures are possible). In addition the 23 futures research methods covered in this volume are described in a tabular taxonomy as being – qualitative, quantitative, normative and / or exploratory. This is useful and gives the reader a perspective that they might have not previously considered. On the other hand, this kind of distinction might cause debate among futurists.

The editors welcome this kind of scholarly review. However, considerable time in hair-splitting debate is characteristic of fields that are either hopelessly academic or whose time has passed – e.g. anatomy, philosophy, and spherical harmonics.

Further distinctions are made between historians (what has happened), journalists (what is happening) and futurists (what could happen and what we might do to bring about a desirable future and prepare for potential undesirable futures). This is useful but the tone of this passage may lead some to enhance the role/importance of futurists at the expense of historians and journalists. Similarly, planners are described as looking 3-5 years in the future (I have heard them described as tactical futurists) but futurists as looking as long as 25 years down the road. The paragraph continues to explain how the work of futurists can enhance the importance of planners but not vice versa. My concern applies here as well but it can also be said that the futures research field needs a shot in the arm so these kind of distinctions might encourage more to enter the field and give a renewed spirit to existing futurists. Heck, everyone has an aunt, uncle or cousin who is a historian, journalist or planner. How many of us are within three degrees of separation of a futurist?

Readers of chapters on the Delphi method and environmental scanning are likely to learn more than they already know about these techniques. For the futures wheel I especially liked the three-level wheel (future impacts, current inputs, historical forces). I have never seen that before. The cross impact analysis module is similarly useful but typos in formulas and errors in calculations abound here. This can only discourage the reader trying to get a handle on the mathematics and creates a credibility gap with other chapters. More serious proofreading would be recommended for future versions.

Navigation is easy within modules but not between modules. The reader must always go back to the table of contents on the first ‘page’ of the CD to move to other chapters. However, this is not a major problem and may be merely a reflection on my lack of sophistication with Adobe Acrobat.

In general I would enthusiastically recommend this CD for those interested in learning about futures research or future studies, those fairly new to the field as well as fully entrenched futures professionals. Historians, journalists, planners, anatomists, philosophers and spherical harmonicists are welcome as well.

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