



Ethno-Futurism lee shupp

I'm really pleased to be here. I'm not really used to presenting in just a one-way form of communication. So, I have to get used to that and to me a sign that I am doing a good job would be people writing madly with a million questions for tomorrow. What I'm going to try to do, is to give you guys too much information rather than too little. And raise more questions than I answer. So hopefully I can get a chance to do that.

People ask me what is an ethno-futurist? And how did I get to the common ethno-futurist. So, let me explain that really quickly. I sort of came into it sideways, which is sort of typical for my life, because I sort of have a non linear life. I suppose that is one of the reasons why I'm attracted to futurist research and to ethnography. Because they're both pretty non-linear disciplines. I started off getting a BA in radio television and film. I learned about making film and making videos and really loved it. So I immediately applied at Oz and became a professional musician. I was about a professional musician for about ten years. and then I got bored, and decided I wasn't getting enough brain food. So I went back to school, and got a Masters in communication and broadcasting electronic communication.

And at that time, the Internet was just starting to take off. It was really obvious to me that the Internet was going to be a really big deal. So when it came time to write my thesis, I wanted to write about the Internet, something that hadn't happened yet. I found to my dismay, as I talked to academic advisors, that there was no methodology to talk about the future. So the whole academic tool kit that I had was just really a sort of post mortem on dead ideas because I could dissect and understand things that had already happened but I couldn't really talk about things that hadn't happened yet. And this really bothered me.

So I went to the library and started shopping around for methodology I could use to talk about the Internet. And I came across this small section on futurist research. And I was utterly fascinated. I blitzed that section in the library in a couple of weeks and read every book. I found out there were two futurist programs in the U.S. and when it came time for my graduation for my masters program I was already skipping my graduation to start my futurist program. That was at the University of Houston in Clear Lake, right in the shadow of NASA. That was a great experience, I learned so much there. I got to learn from a wide variety of people, from labour union activists to futurists. It was mind bending and I had a great time. From there I got hired

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by one of the people in the program, at a small marketing firm, where we were really combining futurist techniques and ethnography. And we were running around with high-end cameras because at that time there weren't small digital cameras.

At that company my paychecks started to get later and later and I started noticing more and more bizarre behaviour among the two people running the company. I had to ask myself: "Who is going to want to hire an ethno-futurist?" And the answer ended being up Cheskin. When Cheskin hired me they weren't really sure what an ethno-futurist was. They thought they wanted one. But then it worked out really well. I did a lot of things that the company was already doing. Cheskin had been around since 1944. So I had a little more confidence that my paychecks were going to show up on time. There's a really big depth of experience at Cheskin. Cheskin has worked in everything from the early stages of product development all the way through the product development process, all the way up to marketing communications. So I felt that I was getting this great big experience, and that was certainly true. The breadth of experience was really awesome and really great at Cheskin. I worked on everything from sexual disfunction, to food and beverage products to high technology products. So it really had been a wide variety of things.

There's also a lot of combination across categories. We see things happening in one consumer category transfer into another. And that has been really interesting. I have done a lot of work Pepsi and ended up working for high-tech companies and said: "You guys think more like engineers and not marketers like Pepsi." And at companies like Pepsi I would say: "Gee, the high-tech companies, they are really leveraging communication much faster. You guys should try that." And because we were located in Silicon Valley I got to play with a lot of new technologies. So I get to play with the future a lot. People have new things and gizmos and I get to play with them, so it's pretty fun. So I'm hoping to share that sense of fun with you guys and take you guys

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for a pretty quick mind walk. And we're going to cover a lot of ground and, like I said, I hope to raise a lot more questions than I answer. We're going to start off with a brief look at chaos theory, because the future is a chaotic place. Then I'm going to give you an overview of the futurist perspective. And then we're going to talk about ethnography, then I'm going to tie that together with diffusion of innovations. Sound fun? Okay, off we go.

So when you think about the future, chaos and contradiction just abound everywhere. The problem is that we don't have too little information about the future, we have way too much. And information we get from resources is contradictory and it's really hard to make sense of. Chaos theory is the study of seemingly random and unpredictable events. Does that sound like the future? It has been used to predict all kinds of things from weather systems to the stockmarket.

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One of the interesting things about chaos is that it has systems that have tons of apparent chaos. And in any of those systems, there’s order underlining the chaos. You just have to know where to look for it. So it’s very similar to the way the futurist perspective works. One of the most interesting ideas to come out of chaos theories is the idea of a fractal.

A fractal is a geometric form that’s similar structure at all scales of magnification. So you have the same pattern that looks very similar at different layers of magnification. That works for coastlines, for clouds, for broccoli and for leaves. And if you think about clouds, if you look at the form of a cloud and it has this kind of shape, right. That swiggly irregular edge of a cloud shape and you zoom in to just the edge of that cloud, you see that shape again at a different level of magnification, the same swiggly kind of shape.

You think about a leaf. A tree stands up like this. It has that kind of shape, that leaf like shape. You look at the leaf, again, the same leaf like shape, you look at all the fuzzy stuff that go along the outside of the leaf. Guess what, it’s the same fuzzy leaf like shape. So an example of a fractal. So maybe you’ll look at a broccoli a little different the next time you eat it. If you go on the web, you can see all kinds of computer generated fractals. That’s a really fun waste of time, if you could do it. As you can see I got a little too carried away. The interesting thing about these fractals is that they all derive from mathematical formulas. So if you go to a web, look at fractals and see the formulas that are underneath them. So ethno-futurism is really about finding fractals. And so what I’m going to advocate today is if you can zoom out and look wide and use the futurist perspective to look for patterns. And then zoom in using ethnography to really see that you’re seeing similar patterns on the street and in people’s behaviour. And so what I really do is look for fractals. I look for patterns that are seen from the wide futurist perspective and from a deep ethnographic perspective.

So first we’ll zoom out and talk about the futurist perspective. Futurist research is the systemic study of alternative futures. And we really try to understand the process of change. The same way that historians talk about change in the past or journalists talk about change in the present, futurists think about change in the future. And where most other disciplines have taught us norm and certainty and to try to make it go away, futurists are fascinated by uncertainty. The stuff that really attracts us is the stuff we just can’t figure out. That’s really different from the way that we were raised at school because most of what we do is try to quantify. And to quantify stuff, we try to get rid of uncertainty. So if you’re used to using spread sheets and excel a lot to make decisions, this is kind of hard. And the uncertainty is always there, nonetheless. Contrary to a lot of popular believe, futurists can not predict the future. What we talk about is alternative futures. We look at different ways the future may unfold. And we look at the different driving forces that may drive the future in one direction or another.

The tool that futurists use a lot is scenarios. And scenarios are really simply stories about alternative futures. And what we’ll do is we’ll find out things that are about most important to understand and most uncertain. And we use those as the axis on a scenario. So we can look at

the range of outcomes. From that range of outcomes, we can develop stories about the future and illustrate what the future may be like. And good scenarios should be about possible and impossible, and internally consistent so that you can role-play in a scenario. And just the way the scenario describes, should make sense to you. Role playing is a really good way to discover the unattended consequences or surprising things that may happen in a scenario.

And again we talk about a range of alternative futures. One of the things that really counts as a futurist is developing a future where you sort have a bad, middle and good, because then everybody automatically gravitates for the middle scenario. So we try to develop scenarios that are very balanced. They work from the hinge points of things that are critically uncertain. And again, to be really good, they need to be possible, plausible and internally consistent.

What does the future hold? The one thing I can tell you for sure that the future is going to hold is change. And the accelerator is down and it's just going to get faster. I read an interview with the head of the New York City Public Library who believes that the volume of knowledge in New York City public libraries is doubling about every 18 months. The body of scientific knowledge that we have right now is doubling about every two years. We have more scientists alive now than have been alive through human history because of exponential population growth. So because of all of these people learning new things, change is just going to get faster and faster. I think one of the interesting things that we have to deal with as a culture is that our technology is racing ahead. And human culture doesn't change nearly as quickly as technology does. So we're going to have to make some interesting adjustments in how human culture can try to keep up to technological change and adapt to it. I think it's going to be really interesting to see how well we do. All change is not the same. Change is sometimes this overwhelming huge thing that's really hard to understand.

“The body of scientific knowledge that we have right now is doubling about every two years.”

I'd like to walk you through some different kinds of change. Maybe you'll think about change a little differently. The different kinds of change I'm going to talk about are cyclical change, macro-trends, micro-trends, fads, discontinuities and wild cards.

Cyclical change are just cycles. It is repeating patterns over time. A couple of examples: seasons changing or the economic cycle. The way we change very slightly, cycles are a little different everytime they come around. But the basic pattern is the same and because of that, they're very highly predictable. For instance, even in the middle of dotcom mania, we knew that at some point the stock market was going to come down. The stock market couldn't be high forever because we recognize that there is an economic cycle. We didn't know how hard and how fast. But we did know that it would come down at some point.

A macrotrend is a driving force that brings changes in attitudes and behaviour. That last part is really important – changes in attitudes and behaviour. An example is globalization. And globalization is happening in myriad ways. It's not just economic. We're seeing globalization economically, culturally, biologically. All things are coming together really fast. In California, we're having an interesting problem with eucalyptus trees. It turns out that in the Oakland fire in the 90s, the eucalyptus trees exploded and really got the fire work. But eucalyptus trees are

from Australia, they were imported into California and did really well in California's ecosystem because there is no cheques and balances on eucalyptus trees. So this is an example of biological globalization where now in California we are trying to figure out what to do about Australian trees. And Australia. What happened when they introduced rabbits to Australia. You get another funny story.

The rate of change of macro trends is slow to moderate because cultures take time to change. If you know where to look for macro trends, they are fairly predictable. Macrotrends don't start off as macrotrends, they start off on fringes. You think about some things that are generally accepted today, they started on the fringes. Think about the environmental movement. Started with a book by Rachel Carlson called Silent Spring. A lot of people thought she was pretty kooky. You think about civil rights, that started with people that were very radical abolitionists. If you think about women's suffrage, that also started as a fringe, made it gradually mainstream and came through to culture. Now I would guess that most of us recycle. Most of us believe in racial equality and most of us believe that women should have the same opportunities as men. So macrotrends don't start off as macrotrends, they start off as fringe. And I'll show you more on how they evolve in just a moment.

A microtrend is the driving force that defines the attitudes and behaviour of a subculture. So before things stream, a macrotrend starts off as a microtrend. The really interesting example right now is the No Logo movement, from Canada's own Naomi Klein. I think this is a really interesting new movement to watch right now. It's basically a reaction against the very aggressive branding of corporations where people are saying we are tired of this and we are tired of public space being invaded by corporations. Right now, it is very representative of the subculture. But it is the kind that a futurist watches really carefully to see if we see signs that it is going to mainstream. If it does, it has huge implications for the business environment.

The predictability is loaded to moderate. Interesting things happen in subcultures because subcultures tend to have a very similar shared set of values. trends can go through subcultures very quickly. The trick is figuring out when is it going to move from subcultures to the mainstream.

A fad is a rapid adoption of an idea or product that requires little attitude or behavioural change. Think hula hoops, macarena and scooters. In California, we're seeing scooters everywhere right now, but it's not going to last very long. It is a fad. And fads are really hard to leverage, especially for businesses because fads come and go really quickly, and they are very difficult to predict. For a lot of companies, by the time product development time rolls around, even if you knew what a fad was, you're still going to have your product out by the time that the fad was still happening.

A discontinuity is a macrotrend that abruptly changes or reverses. It is often sparked by technical innovation. A good example right now is PVRs, personal video recorders. The rate of change can be really sudden. Napster is a great example. Predictability is low to moderate. And you really have to look all the time to spot discontinuities. One of the really good things to

do is to think about the assumptions that you're working under, either as an individual or as a business. And ask yourself, what could really screw things up? Because those kinds of things are discontinuities. Napster came out of nowhere and now the music and media companies are still scrambling to figure out if their revenue models are going to work going forward in the future. I think it's an open question. I think people like file sharing. It's a human behaviour that seems to be very very strong. It's going to be really interesting to see if they can figure out a revenue model that is going to work. I think the same thing is holding true with PVRs. I've done ethnography with PVR and replay users. And they're behaviour is very, very interesting. About 75 to 80% of the time, people are skipping commercials. That's huge implications for the revenue models that all of our media is built around. It also provides really interesting opportunities, because if people agree to you can actually track their behaviour and know much better what people are watching than what we have known before. One of the interesting things we learned was during the Superbowl. People replayed certain ads over and over again.

A wild card is a low cost, high impact event. Think contact of aliens. I think most of us would agree, that that is a probably a pretty low percentage of that happening in our live times. But if it did happen, the world would be changed instantly. Our value systems, our systems of religion, everything we think about our place in the universe would be different overnight. If you're interested on wild cards, there's a great book on wild cards by futurist called Peterson. And he has about 80 or 100 wild cards and they're really fun to read.

Of all the different kinds of change macro trends provide the best opportunities to build business strategy. The macro trend tends to be mainstream, so it tends to be very wide. It tends to be pretty slow as cultures change pretty slowly and you can build business strategy, business ideas on it. Micro trends are worthwhile watching, they can turn into macro trends. And fads are often over by the time you can get to the market. Anybody remember Pokemon? I said that macro trends started on fringes. I wanted to show you the life cycle of a macro trend. Macro trends are really born on the fringe, science fiction and subcultures. I saw a great book by a fiction writer, I believe it was Salman Rushdie, who argued that it is harder and harder to write good fiction because you come up with an idea and it is a really good idea, but to get the idea into a book and publish it before someone does it in real life now.

So science fiction is a place where a lot of future stuff has been born. Also subcultures. And for that reason as a futurist, I hang out in the fringe a lot. I go to events like Burning Man to see what is going on. Because that is really the spawning grounds of trends. And in subcultures, not everything that you see in subcultures is going to go mainstream. That is where trends are born, so it's really important to look at the fringe and be able to relax your belief system and really opening questioning, and try to figure out why things are working in subcultures. From the fringe, people start noticing and you start seeing experts talking about stuff, futurist, research reports, alternative magazines. Start seeing a little bit of a buzz. Then it moves into mass media, to internet, news, campaigns. And from there it goes to the power structure and they start to figure out what they are going to do about this thing. What are we going to do

about environmentalism? It starts to get into lobbies and at last it ends up in formal structures, legislation and courts. And not surprisingly, the government is the last to know.

One of the things that futurists do all the time is to stand. And standing is basically just continually watching the external environment for signs of change. So that means that we get out a lot and look at fringe culture, we read a lot, we are very curious. And the goal is to look for fractals, to look for relationships between seemingly unrelated events and look for patterns in chaos.

We categorize macrotrends, and futurists typically use what is called steep categories that is looking at social systems, technology, economy, the environment, and the political systems. I really recommend that you think about your life or your business and develop your own categories that you think are really going to work for you. I've done some work with BMW Design Works and one of the things that they look at for car design is furniture changes. While it doesn't seem like there is a relationship, there is. Good scanning should really be customized to whatever your needs are.

Change is not easily categorized. One of the things you have to realize when you scan is as stuff gets really big and packed up, it is going across categories. You have to allow for that and realizing that not everything is going to fit neatly into a pocket. Futurist research uses a whole range of different methods. I would argue that futurist research in the field has been too reliant on secondary research and on quantitative research. There's a whole bunch of futurists who do nothing but read magazines and clip articles. But if you remember from the life cycle of a macrotrend, something is pretty well under way by the time it is hitting mainstream media.

I prefer to read more of the ethnographic and experiential side, because I'm really interested in how people are reinventing things on the street. Well a lot of what we do is applied exploration. Applied exploration is a combination of these techniques. You can really look at things from a lot of different angles. You can really consider a problem or an uncertainty from a lot of different view points.

The benefits of the futurist perspective are: first, there is a better understanding of the process of change and realize that not all change is the same. You know what the life cycle of a macrotrend is, you know that you have to be watching the fringes and you know when you look at a microtrend, they are about to become macrotrends. So you can look at microtrends as a potential to provide you opportunities or they may be threatening what we are doing. You're gaining awareness of potential discontinuities. You ask yourself what could really screw this up? Because the chances are you'll see something How are we going to get an understanding of alternative futures. If we talk about futures, there is not one predetermined future but there are a range of possible futures. And we look at stories about these futures that allow us to understand the alternatives better.

The way this is a futurist research are: as I said, there's a lot of reliance on secondary research. A lot of futurist research is technologically deterministic. There was an ad, I think it was AT&T, a couple of years ago. It was sort of like, "Have you taken your laptop to the beach

to do your work? You will.” And it talked about all these new technologies and the tagline was: “You will.” And it was hysterically funny to look at because nobody’s going to take their laptop to the beach, a place where there is sun and sand. It is really difficult to use it and try to do work. But this is the attitude of a lot of the futurist community. Because we have all these great new technologies that we are going to use them. We’re still kind of waiting for the video phone right? That is a classic example. Somebody said, we can do this technology with the video phones so everybody is going to do it. But they didn’t go look at human behaviour. You think about how you talk on the phone, a lot of times, you just got out of the shower, your hair is messed up. Or you’re doing the dishes, you are multi-tasking and you don’t really want the other person to see you.

A lot of times futurist research underestimates human culture. We reinvent technologies all the time to see what we really want to do with them. When the telephone first came out, there is all kinds of great quotes: “No one will ever talk to other people with these things.” And what they thought telephones would be used for was that telephones would be placed in a central

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location, preferably the living room, and then everyone would gather around to listen to what’s being broadcast on the telephone. Guess what, it didn’t work. And the same thing interestingly happened with the Internet. People thought the main reason for the Internet would be to broadcast but basically much like the telephone, people wanted to communicate with each other. So a lot of times there’s an underestimation of the impact of human culture and technology.

The last part is that you have to remember to laugh at surprises. Even really good futurists cannot read the future. The future always happens in surprising new ways. And that’s again why we need to talk about alternative futures and be really flexible and open when you think about what the future may hold.

So it’s a good balance to futurist research, ethnography can provide you a way of really looking into culture and see what humans are doing and take the abstract ideas of futurist research and see how they are being played out on the street. So now we’re going to zoom in to look for fractals and use ethnography as a tool.

Ethnography basically has three parts: observation, participation, and visual data. Ethnography is really fun. I really like my job because I get to hang out with people all the time. And I pretty much go anywhere and hang out with anybody. And that is really required if you want to do ethnography. If you really like structure, and you really like predictability and you really like being in control, don’t be an ethnographer. It’s tough, it’s not for you. You get surprises all the time. A lot of times we will just show up with people and for instance to study mobile

communication use. We just hang out with people for four hours. We meet them somewhere and they have no idea where we are going and what we are doing. You have to be able to be very spontaneous to take advantage of opportunities as they present themselves. Thank you very much.