

Future Shock revisited

by *Andy Hines*

It was with a degree of hesitation that I picked up a copy of *Future Shock* for a Book Club meeting. I had read it long ago, and figured it might come off dated. I was pleasantly surprised to find that it has stood the test of time well and provides us with an outstanding example of foresight provides insight into the future.

To refresh those who may also have read it long ago, the basic thesis is that there are limits to the amount of change that one can absorb. The “roaring current of change” overwhelms our ability to adapt to it. The result is future shock—“shattering stress and disorientation....a real sickness.”

Toffler defines future shock as the distress that arises from an overload of human adaptive systems and decision-making

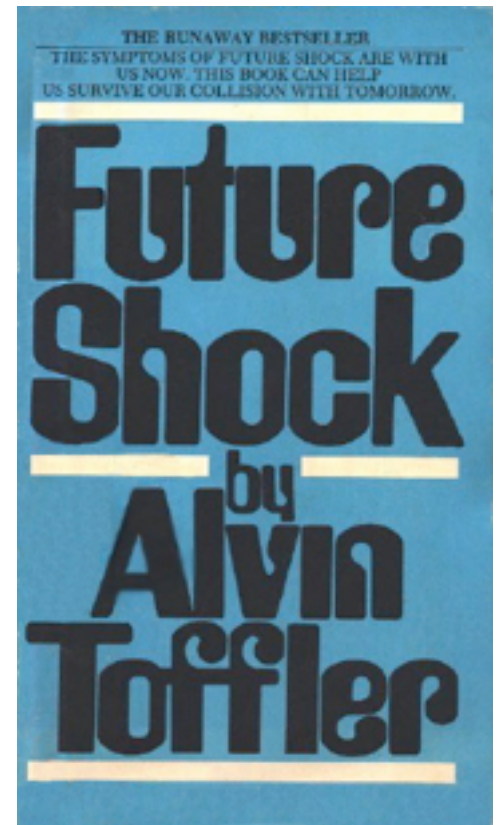
He cites the thesis of the book “that there are discoverable limits to the amount of change that the human organism can absorb.” He defines future shock as “the distress, both physical and psychological, that arises from an overload of the human organism’s physical adaptive systems and its decision-making processes” with symptoms including anxiety, hostility, violence, illness, depression apathy, and withdrawal.

We might argue over whether or not that is actually true—compelling cases can be made for or against. I would put myself in the camp that our future shock absorbers are greater than Toffler anticipated, that we are more adaptive and resilient than he forecasted. But I can see cases for his argument, and even if one disagrees with the notion of future shock, it raised a critically important issue. As individuals and as a society, it clearly benefits us to think about the impact of the rapid rate of changes and our ability to cope.

Toffler evolved into the role of futurist from a journalism background. He coined the term in a 1965 article and wrote the book five years later in 1970. As we know, it was an immensely influential book and helped to put foresight on the map. For that alone, we futurists ought to be grateful.

I was struck by his choice of words—he doesn’t mince them. We see descriptors such as violent, thrust, burst, splinter, upheaval, explosion, shattering, overwhelming, and my favorite, hammerblows! He was alarmed and he wanted to make sure readers got the point that future shock was serious.

The emphasis of the book is more on diagnosis than prescription. Fair enough, of course, as he was



Future Shock

by Alvin Toffler



introducing the notion of a problem. But he did not leave us without any hope. In fact, he states the purpose of the book as “helping us to come to terms with the future....and increase future consciousness.”

Raising awareness is part of the prescription. He also suggested a need for “social futurism,” which one could say is the descendant of “social foresight” that has been championed by contemporary futurists, notably Richard Slaughter.

In reflecting on why

“future shock,” in my mind’ at least did not turn out as harmful as forecast—systems seek equilibrium. I talked about this in a [previous post](#) on Kegan and Lahey’s wonderful *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work*.

I was a little surprised to see this very clear statement: “No serious futurist deals in predictions.” While that is generally held by many if not most futurists, there is a school of thought out there that sees a role for prediction.

One quibble I have, since it deals with a subject I’ve been quite involved with: “values are incessantly changing.” I would argue that values change, even in world of rapid change, has proved to be relatively stable and gradual. From the vantage point of 1970, however, his point may be well taken. Postmodern values in 1970 were just making their appearance. He suggested they were 2-3% of the population, though he didn’t use the

Many of the changes portrayed critically at the time can be seen differently today. His point about the ‘rental revolution’ was seen negatively then, but is now seen positively as ‘sharing’

postmodern terminology. And today they may be at 25-30% (some say even higher) of populations in the affluent countries. When taken in context of human history, that is indeed rapid change! It may seem relatively slow to us because other sectors are indeed changing so rapidly.

In our class on [Social Change](#) at the Houston foresight program, we talk



Alvin Toffler:

Image: Wikimedia Commons

about ten major theories of social change. Technology is one of the ten, and Toffler makes no bones about technology being the major driver in his view: “technology is indisputably a major force behind this accelerative thrust.” I would note that he says “a” and not “the,” so he is leaving room

for other theories as well. But technology is the subject at hand, here. And he brings in an idea from our “Systems Thinking” class when says that the reason technology is so powerful is that it “feeds on itself” – positive feedback or reinforcing loops in our parlance.

A key factor behind future shock is that we find ourselves in more and more situations that are novel, in which we have no experience to draw upon. He also talks about “transcience”—the temporariness in everyday life, and the rapid rate of turnover in relationships.

Many of the changes portrayed in negative light can be seen differently today. For instance, I was struck by a point about the “rental revolution.” While this was perceived in a largely negative light at the time, in my work we talk about “sharing” today in a more positive light. We see people being less concerned about “ownership” and more concerned about “access” and there are some good things emerging from that. I often use jokes about why 25 homes in

The reason that “future shock” did not turn out as harmful as forecast, with hindsight, is that systems seek equilibrium

a neighborhood need 25 lawnmowers —a sharing approach could reduce that number. Similarly, mobility is generally interpreted in a negative light, but one could also see that as a positive. Same with job turnover – it could be that multiple careers makes life more interesting.

His concept of ad-hocracy was quite prescient in anticipating the shift from hierarchical to network models of organization, and the shift to project-based work. He talked about “experience industries, and “vicarious people” which we now refer to as celebrity culture. He talked about cloning, cyborgs, and virtual reality. He talked about the reconfiguration of family, over-choice, and design-it-yourself (which we call co-creation) . He also used the term “mental models” which is an important part of our lexicon today.

To be balanced, there were a couple of misses here and there – man communicating with dolphins and submarine communities has not proven to be terribly useful yet, but far more was on target than off.

Despite the many warnings he offers about the impacts of technology, he is not anti-technology. “we cannot and must not turn off the switch of technological progress.” And he is critical of those he dubs anti-technology, citing Ellul, Fromm, Mumford, and Marcuse.

He raised a point about programmable and non-

programmable decisions (routine and non-routine) and felt that there were too many non-programmable decisions. Too many decisions that we had to make that were novel. Is there where intelligent agents come in?

It’s not about suppressing change, but managing it, although he goes on to suggest that we can still get overwhelmed. He sees education and foresight as key tools:

- “Another approach is to expand man’s adaptive capacities – the central task of education during the super-industrial revolution.”

- “To create a super industrial education, therefore, we shall first need to generate successive, alternative images of the future.”
- Assumptions about the kinds of jobs, professions, and vocations, that may be needed twenty to fifty years in the future, assumptions about the kind of family forms and human relationships, that will prevail; the kinds of ethical and moral problems will arise, the kind of technology that will surround us and the organizational structure with which we must mesh.”

He advocated creating a “council of the future in every school and community.” In sum, he raised the notion of future shock as a cautionary tale, and suggested foresight as a key tool for dealing with it. I agree! **C**

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Andy Hines is Lecturer at the University of Houston’s Graduate Program in Foresight. He speaks, workshops, and consults through his firm Hinesight.