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When Did It Start? Origin of the foresight field

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Abstract:	<p>While foresight continues to develop as a field, it is arguably still relatively unknown and under-appreciated by potential clients and the public. Futurists are still explaining themselves and what they do on a regular basis. One challenge in explaining futures work is a lack of consensus around key questions about the field. While a variety of perspectives is valuable to futures work, for those new to it, the myriad answers to core questions -- such as who futurists are, how futurists work, and how long have futurists been doing it -- creates unnecessary confusion.</p> <p>While efforts have been made to address these questions, progress has been spotty. The field has been unable to settle on a name for itself that captures who futurists are. The recently proposed Foresight Competency Model is a step towards consensus on how futurists work (Hines, Gary, Daheim, and van der Laan, 2017). A key question that remains open is how long has formal futures work been done, i.e., when did foresight begin as a field. An informal listserv discussion among professional futurists revealed a lack of consensus that was confirmed by a literature search. This piece took on the challenge of pinning down a specific year as the beginning of field --concluding that 1945 is the best candidate. The goal is to help futurists explain the field to those new to it.</p>

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While foresight continues to develop as a field, it is arguably still relatively unknown and under-appreciated by potential clients and the public. Futurists are still explaining themselves and what they do on a regular basis. One challenge in explaining futures work is a lack of consensus around key questions about the field. While a variety of perspectives is valuable to futures work, for those new to it, the myriad answers to core questions -- such as who futurists are, how futurists work, and how long have futurists been doing it -- creates unnecessary confusion.

While efforts have been made to address these questions, progress has been spotty. The field has been unable to settle on a name for itself that captures who futurists are. The recently proposed Foresight Competency Model is a step towards consensus on how futurists work (Hines, Gary, Daheim, and van der Laan, 2017). A key question that remains open is how long has formal futures work been done, i.e., when did foresight begin as a field. An informal listserv discussion among professional futurists revealed a lack of consensus that was confirmed by a literature search. This piece took on the challenge of pinning down a specific year as the beginning of field --concluding that 1945 is the best candidate. The goal is to help futurists explain the field to those new to it.

Keywords

foresight, history, field, origins, RAND

Introduction

How do you respond when asked “how long has foresight and futurists been around? An audience member posed that question to the author recently, who responded “just after WW2,” as is typical. Upon reflection, it was clear that the field lacked a firm start date. That seemed a bit odd, but understandable, given the relative newness of the field. The Houston Foresight program went through this a few years ago in clarifying its history in seeking to arrange its 40 anniversary celebration. Was it was founded in 1974 or 1975. The program settled on 1974, but that was easier to pin down by using when courses were offered (Houston Futures, n.d.). For the field as a whole, there is nothing that obviously or definitively suggests a beginning.

At the risk of triggering another existential crisis discussion, a question was posed about the founding of the field as a “geeky academic question” to colleagues on the Association of Professional Futurists (APF) listserv. The framing reflect a fear that its academic nature might trigger the wrath of the “just do it” faction of the membership. More specifically, it was asked what year fellow APFers pegged the start of the field when asked by a client or an interested party. It turned out to be a fun and useful discussion, such that it was agreed to compile the highlights of the discussion and do some supplementary research for publication.*

* Participants in the initial APF listserv discussion included: Bryan Alexander, Marcus Barber, Clem Bezold, Josh Calder, Stuart Candy, Andrew Curry, Jim Dator, Dennis Draeger, Terry Grim, John Jackson, June Lo, Tom Lombardo, Oliver Markley, Ruben Nelson, Wendy Schultz, David Stehlik, Luke van der Laan, Verne Wheelright

To be clear, this piece is not a definitive early history of the field, but is sharply focused on a simple question: what year might be agreed upon as the start of the futures studies/foresight field. And even here, the quest to set a start date is not intended to be definitive or all-encompassing. Technically speaking, it could be argued that the field has several origins and a continuum is more accurate than a single point. Any single point is likely to be contested. This paper acknowledges this point, but pursues the objective of identifying a single point to aid communicating about the field.

The investigation pursued the following three paths:

- Synthesized highlight from the APF discussions as a starting point for further research (i.e., the discussion suggested sources previous work on the topic)
- Bell's 2003 Foundations addressed the issue (but didn't settle on a date)
- A fresh literature search

The APF discussion and previous work

The APF discussion on the origins of the field ranged from "the moment homo erectus began wearing clothes for warmth" through various key landmarks of futures thinking and study, to some more specific timing suggestions much closer to the present. A key distinction is the origins of thinking about the future versus the origins of the field. For futures thinking, one can go as far back as the Oracle of Delphi - or farther if one agrees with contemporary psychologists suggesting that the brain is designed to make decisions through futures thinking by creating small "what if" scenarios (Seligman et al., 2013). Notable scholars whose work explored the future to some degree were mentioned, such as St. Augustine in the 4th century and Ibn Kaldun in the 15th, along with the Incan and Mayan calendars. The Marquis de Condorcet from the 19th century got a few mentions. Around the same time, Volney's 1791 *Ruins of Empires* as key text. Several works of Jules Verne from the 19th century were added to the conversation. HG Wells came up as a key figure at the turn of the 20th century. It was noted that he had the idea of a discipline of study pertaining to the future, with proposed methods, values, and various and numerous identified trends and predictions (more on that below). The US government's Committee on Social Trends in 1933 was mentioned as a significant landmark. For the field, WW2 was most frequently mentioned, noting the use of forecasting by the US military. National planning efforts during and after the war were included as well. Perhaps the comments around this period are best summed up as "just before, during, and/or after WWII." The French "Prospective" path was cited as well, but it was noted that it developed after the US military's WW2 path. Some put the date more recent, such as the founding of WFS, WFSF, or the academic programs. There were relatively few specific dates offered, nor were there strong opinions.

APF did a visual history as part of its Futures of Futures project, but it's "definitely incomplete" according to Wendy Schultz (2012), who captured the history and curated a timeline housing member contributions. This work ranged back 10,000 years, and organized futures into five waves:

- the oral tradition,
- early written age,
- extraction and enlightenment,
- systems and cybernetics, (this wave coincides with the circa WW2 origin)
- complexity and emergence.

Members contributed to a Wiki on the history of futures, but again there was not an effort to specifically address the beginning of the field.

Bell’s 2003 compilation

Bell (2003, 60) pulled together the views of several futurists on the fields origins (year of publication in parenthesis) in his classic Foundations book:

- Flechtheim (1971) coined futurology in the 1940s and proposed it as a new branch of knowledge.
- Jungk (1971) refers to the haphazard beginnings in 1944.
- Nanus (1984) mid-40s to the late 1960s when the foundational concepts and methods were laid down.
- Jones (1980) cites research during the 1950s leading to the rapid growth of the early 1960s.
- Henshel (1981) says that the modern futures field, in the sense of a self-awareness or collective self-consciousness started sometime between 1950 and 1960.
- Helmer (1983) while roots are the 1950s in Europe, the futures movement developed since 1963.
- Maruyama (1978) places the start at 1958.
- Cornish (1977) picks the 1960s as the decade when the futurist movement began developing rapidly.
- Markley (1983) picks 1963 as the year in which a defined field emerged.

Bell (2003, 60-61) summed it up as: “the collective activities of modern futurists, though reaching back to earlier times, became clearly visible in the second half of the 1940s and 1950s. By the mid-1960s, they took on many of the features of a social movement, began growing rapidly, and encouraged the self-identification of participants as futurists.”

For our purposes of a specific date, one notes some convergence on the 1940s and 1950s and a few more conservative votes on the 1960s. A key factor in where one dates it relates to one’s conception of what a field is – which will be explored later in the piece.

What the literature says

Neither the APF discussion and follow-up or Bell’s compilation lead us to a specific date, although they suggest a ballpark estimate of the end of WW2.

A review of several overviews and excellent historical pieces about the field did not uncover work that specifically addressed “when did it start?” Cornish’s (1977; 2004) classic *The Study of the Future* has an excellent overview of the history of thinking about the future as well as key developments in the field, but does not address the question of when the field started. He did not address it 2004 follow-up work either. Two other notable overviews of the field, Lombardo’s *Contemporary Futurist Thought* and *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* also did not specify a date.

Several others in the last few decades indirectly suggested beginnings around the end of WW2:

- Mills and Bishop (2000) noted that foresight developed in four phases, putting the first phase after the **end of the Second World War** and continuing through the early 1960s.
- Coates et al. (2001) in looking at the history of technology forecasting, noted its development largely under the aegis of the U.S. government was “**well underway by 1949.**”

- Historian and futurist David Staley's (2007, 8) excellent exploration of the similarity between the study of history and of the future refers to Nicholas Rescher's "futurist boom" of engineers, systems analysts, economists, demographers, and sociologists **taking place after WW2**.
- Sardar (2010, 178) notes a connection to origins and naming: "As a subject of inquiry with a body of learned literature, recognizable knowledge base, and definable contour of concepts, methodologies, practices and processes, futures studies is now **well over 50 years old**."
- Marek Jemala (2010) looked at foresight through the context of globalization. He distinguishes the era of foresight, citing the former as beginning in **1949**. Interestingly, he cites work in China in 1949 between the government and specialists worked together on the long-term S&T development strategy. These were followed by the USA and Japan in 1950s and then by similar efforts in France, and eventually the Netherlands, Germany and the UK.
- Kaya Tolon (2011, 20) notes the arms and space races prompting the needs to see the future and puts the "birth of futures studies during the early Cold War era."
- Hyeonju Son (2015) did a fabulous and comprehensive deep dive on the history of modern western futures studies, dividing it into three periods. The first "rationalization" phase is placed from **1945** to the 1960s which supports the end of WW2 as a start. He deemed this rationalization phase as marking the "growth of professionalization of futures studies."
- Andersson's (2018) FUTUREPOL: A Political History of the Future: Knowledge Production and Future Governance 1945-2010) situates foresight at the beginning of the Cold War Era in **1945**. The project sought to explore the role of the future in governance, including exploring the origins of foresight "in the immediate post war period."

Similar to the APF discussion and Bell's analysis, there is some consensus centering on the end of WW2. Before pinning this down, it is useful to consider the question of what constitutes a field.

What is a field?

Asking when did "it" start requires defining the it. When talking about foresight as a field, the point is often made that "we are all futurists." Agreed. The question here focuses on the systematic exploration of the future. In terms of distinguishing a field, however, there is no body that officially decides on fields. Turning to dictionary definitions of a field, they are vague and leave lots of room for interpretation:

- an area of activity or interest (Cambridge Online Dictionary)
- a particular branch of study or sphere of activity or interest (Oxford)
- a course of study or domain of knowledge or practice (American Heritage)
- an area of work, study, etc. (Merriam-Webster)
- a sphere of activity, interest, etc., especially within a particular business or profession (Dictionary.com)

Previous work explored on the question of professionalization and where foresight seemed to stand in that regard (author, 2012, 15.) The table below starts with simplest and loosest test and gets progressively more stringent. It sheds some light on the field question to see it in this context. One could probably agree that the foresight capability emerged before the placeholder target of WW2. There were a smattering of works, with the President's Committee on Social Trends in the US (1933) a prominent example. One could see the discipline emerging in the 1970s with the founding of the Hawaii and Houston graduate programs in futures studies. While criteria can be found for a discipline and profession, there was nothing for capability or field, as they are characterized more subjectively. The

field is in between capability and profession, that is, it is more than a capability, but less than a profession.

Table 1. Where does foresight stand?

Definition (Cambridge Online Dictionary)		Meet the definition
Capability	the ability to do something	Yes
Field	an area of activity or interest	Yes
Discipline	a particular area of study, especially a subject studied at a college or university	Maybe (see Kim 2018)
Profession	any type of work which needs special training or a particular skill, often one respected because it involves a high level of education	No (for a detailed discussion, see Author & Gold, 2013)

Foresight passes the capability test, despite questions over what the “something” is. Previous work concluded that foresight also passes the field test, but there is dissension. Marien (2002) represents a minority view that foresight is not yet a field: “...for those who persist in proclaiming that there is a ‘field’, I simply ask that you tell me who is in it, and who is not, and why.” He makes a good point about the field not being well-defined, but that he goes too far in saying it is not a field at all. There is a simple answer today to who is in: members of the Association of Professional Futurists and the World Futures Studies Federation, who must qualify to be accepted as members. These institutions and their members are part of the core of the field, but there are plenty of futurists who are not members of any of them. Futures studies/foresight, it is fair to say, is “an area of activity or interest.” In developing a Foresight Competency model, members of the APF Professionalization Task Force recommended foresight as the name of the field and futures studies as the academic discipline (Hines, Gary, Daheim, and van der Laan, 2017).

It also depends on what counts at the starting point of the field. If it’s scholarly thought, Dator (2011) suggests serious interest in the future arguably emerged first in Europe in the late 1940s and 50s with Ossip Flechtheim (Germany), Fred Polak (Netherlands), Radovan Richta (Czechoslovakia), and especially Bertrand de Jouvenel (France). But in that same piece, he adds that “many people would have begun the story of the history of futures studies by citing work done during the Second World War by the Research and Development unit of the US Air Force that eventually became the very influential think tank called RAND.” The view proposed here is that the use of formal futures methods on an ongoing basis is the most useful way to characterize the beginning of the field.

And the winner is: 1945

This piece proposes the year 1945 as the start date based on the RAND story. Any proposed date is likely to generate some controversy, given that the field is still debating what to call itself. As Bell (2003, 7) observed, “it is risky, of course, to pick a particular date and say that is when something began. I would give credit to HG Wells for proposing the field in specifically advocating for a science of the future in 1902 (Wagar 1996; Cornish 2004). One could make a case for Ogburn’s 1933 Trends project, but the fact that it didn’t get institutionalized eliminates it. And apologies must be made to the French La Prospective path of development, which came slightly after WW2 in the 1950s.

Clarke (2005) observed that the years from 1939 to 1945 were a sustained exercise in futures thinking. The end of the War era -- one hopes -- and the beginning of an era with nuclear weapons and the Cold War brought with them that recognition that humanity now had the power to destroy itself and was still in conflict. This turning point seems to have generated the belief among a few that there was a need for a better and more systematic approach to anticipating and preparing for the future. As Cornish (2004, 186) observed, "World War II and its aftermath could not help but alter people's way of thinking about the future." Project RAND at least to some degree was a recognition that a new era had dawned (along with a more basic desire to improve future weapons).

Indeed, RAND is at the center of the origin story. Project RAND led to RAND being launched as a freestanding division within the Douglas Aircraft Company in March 1946 and becoming an independent non-profit as of May 1948 Cornish (2004). RAND later spawns Kahn's Hudson Institute and several alum founding the Institute for the Future, from which Gordon later founded The Futures Group. In contrast to the Committee on Social Trends, work related to RAND led to institutionalization and there is the start of the field.

Digging into the details of the RAND story, several sources confirm that Project RAND, which began the path to institutionalization, began in December 1945. Campbell (2004) noted that the Commanding General of the U.S. Army Air Forces, Hap Arnold believed that research and development would be increasingly important in the battles of the future. During the war, he began taking steps to ensure that the civilian-military collaboration and spirit of innovation would continue after the war over (Elliot 2010). Masini (1993, 57) noted "the first indication of a future study was done for the Army Air Corps by Dr. Theodore von Karman; not only did this study project new kinds of arms, it also used judgmental scenarios by aggregating expert opinion. Von Karman was asked in 1944 by Arnold, to prepare a report on the future of the Army Air Force to recommend research and development programs based on those expectations (Governmentattic.org, N.D.; Bell 2003, 29).

The success of this project led to the subsequent idea for doing this collaboration on an ongoing basis, specifically around planning. Thus Project Rand officially got underway in December 1945. General Curtis Lemay refined the concept as new Deputy Head of R&D saying the aim of Project RAND was to conduct: "long-range research that might form the basis for a future military requirement" Bell 2003). Tolon (2011) notes the "highly influential memo asked for a report on future techniques, weapons, ways of training pilots, and securing sufficient funding after WWII ended."

Conclusion

If one accepts the case made here for 1945 as the origin of the field-- based on the research of Bell, Masini, and Campbell among others -- foresight is now 74 years old. It is useful to the field and to futurists to attempt to develop some consensus around core questions and the story(s) of who futurists are, what futurists do, and how long futurists have been doing it. The founding of a professional association, efforts to name the field, and the development of proposed competency model are attempts to develop that story. It is also useful for students have some grounded basis for important questions about the field they are entering. As a foresight practitioner, it helps credibility with clients to have more grounded answers to their often-uneasy questions about just what foresight is and futurists are.

In sum, the year 1945 is proposed as the origin of the field. Let the discussion begin!

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