

The Study of Amy Webb : The Futuristic Novel

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Abstract: *We're looking at the futures of complex, volatile issues—artificial intelligence, workforce automation, global supply chains, geopolitics, the impacts of social media—the math doesn't work out. The goal isn't to predict; it is to be prepared for alternative outcomes. Leaders and their teams must rehearse plausible futures, which mean being flexible on how to accomplish transformation normally, the people we've interviewed are academics who have been researching one theme their entire life. You're a foresight specialist. If you had to define your big idea, what would it be? It's about flexibility. Most people and organizations are very inflexible in how they think about the future. In fact, it's difficult to imagine yourself in the future, and there are neurological reasons for that. Our brains are designed to deal with immediate problems, not future ones. That plus the pace of technology improvement is becoming so fast that we're increasingly focused on the now. Collectively, we are learning to be "nowists," not futurists study..*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The word 'Futuristic' is something that has to do with the future or ahead of the current times. It is divided into two parts: -Utopian and Dystopian fiction. Utopian fiction portrays a setting that agrees with the author's ethos; having various attributes of another reality intended to appeal to readers. Dystopian Fiction offers the opposite the portrayal of a setting that completely disagrees with that author's ethos. Some novels combine both genres often as a metaphor for the different direction humanity can take depending on its choices, ending up with one of two possible features. Both utopias and dystopias are commonly found in science fictions and other speculative fiction genres and arguably are by definition a type of speculative fiction. Dystopian Literature can be traced back to reaction to the French Revolution of 1789 and the prospect that mob rule would produce dictatorship. Dystopian fiction draws not only on several topics that older dystrophic works talked about such as totalitarian governments and anarchism, but also on topics pollution, global warming, climate change, health, the economy and technology. Amy Webb is the worldwide director of the innovative group covering with technology and economics. She is respected journalist and editor. The present study as it work through futuristic novels and identification and her placement in it, provides fresh insights into Amy Webb's role and situation as a writer and locate her work within the dominant theories and critical practices of our time. This thesis proposes to study the most controversial factors of Amy Webb's writings namely her futuristic world, because it is this aspect of her works that has not yet been reviewed properly. This thesis will try to strike a balance between the extreme eulogy and down write condemnation of her response to futuristic world.

Here's the problem with a "nowist" mentality: when faced with uncertainty, we become inflexible. We revert to historical patterns, we stick to a predetermined plan, or we simply refuse to adopt a new mental model. Take climate change: the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis, said there will be devastating effects of climate change by 2100.

Obviously, we will feel the impact of climate change between now and the year 2100 — we are witnessing the devastating effects today. The problem with that is that the year 2100 sounds like the distant future, like science fiction; we can't imagine ourselves at that time, so we do not change our mental models and fail to make substantive changes. It's my observation that leaders in business and government can be quite inflexible. Rather than formulating a long-term vision for how business or society might transform in a positive way, they instead develop three-to-five-year strategies. This is important for financial, risk and growth management, but it also makes an organization vulnerable to outside forces.

I advise the CEOs of the world's largest companies across industries and I also work with the senior leaders of different government agencies. It is a struggle to convince leaders to invest in the farther-future, especially when that requires making shorter-term sacrifices or deviating from an established plan. There are, of course, examples of leaders who are willing to bet big and take risks on transformation, but I can count that number on one hand. Flexibility is key because there is no way to predict the future. I'm a quantitative futurist and I'll be the first person to tell you that predictions are brittle. My academic background is in game theory and economics, so I have some sense of how to build models.

Luke Robert Mason: You're listening to the FUTURES Podcast with me, Luke Robert Mason.

On this episode, I speak to quantitative futurist, Amy Webb.

"I would like to see a future in which we all still have agency, and my concern is that we are getting further and further away from a future in which each one of us has the ability to make decisions." Amy Webb, excerpt from interview.

Amy shared her insights into the importance of trend forecasting, the global challenges faced by modern business, and the tools you need for thinking like a futurist. This episode was recorded on location in London, England, where Amy was due to give a keynote presentation.

Luke Robert Mason: So Amy Webb, you are a futurist. What does that term - futurist - mean to you?

Amy Webb: So in my case, as a futurist I consider myself to be a quantitative futurist who is to say that I use data and quantitative evidence and qualitative evidence, and use that to model out plausible, probable and possible scenarios in the long term, and then develop strategies around that. So it's a data driven process.

Mason: So how did you get interested in this thing - the future?

Webb: The future. So the short end of the story is that this is my second career. My first career was as a foreign correspondent. I was living in Tokyo and China in the mid-90s when a lot of the consumer technology that we take for granted today was first being prototyped. So I got to see very early versions of phones that were connected to the internet, phones that had cameras, and I remember thinking how dramatically that technology was going to change everyday life. I continually had challenges convincing the journalists that I was working with that someday in the very near future, we were all going to have the internet in our pocket, and have access to news 24/7, and we were gonna probably have probably have new distribution channels to enable anybody to share news. And by the way, I could take a photo which would probably mean that I could probably someday be able to take a video and post it from wherever I happen to be. I got constant feedback and editors saying, "Who would ever publish a grainy photo taken from somebody's phone? Nobody would ever do that - a grainy photo will never run in a newspaper." And I remember saying, "I'm not talking about the physical newspaper, I'm talking about the internet." So I got tired of having those arguments and quite frankly the newsroom was tired of me bringing up those arguments, and we parted ways. I started a R&D lab that was prototyping news features, mostly in the distribution realm but basically we were working all the time on interesting and different ways to collect and share news. That was all about the future. At the same time I had discovered Alvin Toffler which then led to all of the futurists from the late 1800s through the 70s or so. I read everything and decided, "Wow, there are people who do this all the time. They think about and model out future scenarios and they do that for all different types of purposes, and that's what I should be doing next".

Mason: So your new book *The Signals Are Talking* is really the methodology for how we analyse and look at the future. Could you share some of those methodologies that you share in the book?

Webb: Sure. So my methodology is six parts, and it was definitely influenced by other futurists who are in the sort of academic space. My model alternates between what Stanford's D School would have called 'flared and focused thinking.' It's been my observation that when people are thinking about the future - especially when it comes to technology - they tend to focus on just one thing. If they're trying to figure out the future of cars - and I just had a long conversation with an auto company about this - what they're trying to do is figure out the future of people moving around. They're not actually trying to figure out the future of cars, because that would assume that we will only ever have cars. That narrow thinking is the result from not going really broad in a methodical way, and going narrow when it makes sense.

So my method is six steps. It starts with hunting down weak signals at the fringe, so these are changes in technology, changes in society, and what I would call *The 10 Modern Sources of Change* which involve everything from ecology to economics and wealth changes. That allows me to create a map and I call that map a 'fringe sketch', but for people who



have done any kind of statistics, it's just a bunch of notes and connections. That essential step - especially when you do it with a team of people - it helps you find all of the different pieces that you otherwise would have missed. It forces you to change the question from, "What's the future of cars?" to, "What's the future of people, pets and objects moving around?"

From there, the second step is to focus and do pattern recognition, and look for patterns from those signals. At that point you should have different trend candidates. Trends are important because they are waypoints to the future. You know, a lot of times people think identifying trends - that's the whole goal, that's the end. Really that's the beginning, because once you've identified trends you have to do three things. So that's the next couple of steps of the process. One is you have to make sure you didn't screw up. A whole bunch of people get distracted by shiny objects. The example that I like to use is *Foursquare* and *checking in badges*. If you can remember way back, many many years ago to 2013 when everybody was checking in and earning their badges. Lots of companies invested, lots of companies made custom badges and everybody thought that the badges and the check-ins were the future. That wasn't the future. Location based services, which is really boring - *that* was the future. That was what was paying attention to. That was the trend.

The third step of the process is to focus, to ask yourself a bunch of questions and to go through data, to go through the models to make sure you didn't mess anything up.

Then the fourth step is to narrow once again and think through timing and trajectory, and then you have to take some kind of action. So the fifth and sixth steps have to do with developing a strategy.

So it's a long explanation, but I should say the reason I just explained it all is because as of last month, I have open-sourced all of my IP so all of my research, all of the work I've ever done is now freely available.

Mason: What's the reason?

Webb: That seems nuts! Why on earth would you do that?

Mason: Well when so many futurists it seems kind of protect their methodologies. Futurists do this magical thinking back in their offices and yet the first thing they say when they get on the stage is, "No-one understands what I do." There's always this fake mythos that's created around what I like to call the 'mediatised futurist.' The futurist who has a keynote speaking career but really doesn't do the hard graft of dealing with the difficult questions associated with this thing called *the future*.

Webb: Right - excellent point, and good question. The reason is because - well. I've always thought it strange that people who run governments and businesses are expected to learn how to use a spreadsheet. They're expected to understand basic accounting, and they're not expected to understand how to think like a futurist. I've always thought that was really strange because ostensibly their jobs are the future.

I think we're on a new kind of time horizon with regards to technology. It's our generation that is living through a transition - it just doesn't feel like it. My daughter - who is pretty young - she's going to be probably the last group of human beings who have to learn how to drive. My father - who is in his 70s - is probably going to be in the last generation of people who still have to type.

We're looking at a whole bunch of fundamentally groundbreaking technologies that range from the various facets of artificial intelligence, to genomic editing, to all kinds of automation. All of these things together will fundamentally change what it's like to be a human. At the same time, we are all also all living through a geo-politically unstable moment in time. I hope it's a moment. Part of that is the fault of the person running our country - my country - right now. If it was anybody else you could use game theory to sort of model out what might happen next. We're in a situation where we truly don't know what might get Tweeted next or what might happen next, and I'm concerned. What my feeling is, now more than ever people are fetishising the future and they feel very anxious about the future, and I want everybody to make smarter decisions and to get informed, and to use the tools that I use to make better decisions. I see no harm in open-sourcing everything. I see that only as a big benefit, because if we are all using futurist tools and models and we're doing it in a serious way that will help everybody.

Mason: Do you think some of the interest - or at least the public interest - in notions and possibilities of the future comes from an attraction to shiny objects? How do you extract or remove people from purely that fascination and help them realise that there's things a lot more difficult to navigate? We're told, "The future is going to be awesome." You get these people who stand on stage and they sell these incredible futures. But it always feels like the reason why

people are so attracted to these futures is because there's something so fundamentally wrong with the present, and this feels like a potential to escape into something that will be better.

Webb: I think you're onto something. I would partially blame it on the pattern recognition parts of our brain that start firing off when we're looking to make sense of something. I think partially what attracts people to tech-utopianism - I think you're absolutely right. I think it's the same reason that we go watch movies in the theatre. It's because we want an escape. Maybe it's also why people go to church. They want the promise of a better tomorrow. But there's also the other side of that coin which is the dystopian visions of the future. There's *plenty* of people who also stand on stage and talk about the end of the world coming.

A couple of things are going on. As humans, we've always been surrounded by a lot of data. We're especially surrounded by and assaulted by enormous amounts of data today, and the way that our brains are wired is that we're constantly looking for patterns to help us make sense of what's around, and the easiest way for us to do something with that information once we've recognised patterns is to fit it into a narrative. That's why storytelling is so fundamental to humanity. It's because that's how we pass information. The people who tell these crazy stories about the future - whether they're positive or negative or strange or whatever - you know, it's easy to connect to them and to what they're saying.

But the thing to keep in mind is that I am a professional futurist and I have absolutely no idea what the future is. My job isn't to tell you or to predict what the future is. My job is to figure out, given what we know to be true today - what are the likely paths and what does the probabilistic model show? Then we use that information to make better decisions. But that's not as easily understood as somebody standing on stage with a pretty picture in the background and spaceships flying overhead and Uber-taxiing it - or whatever they're calling it - these five minutes and saying, "Everything is going to be great. Just wait 15 or 20 years for AGI to kick in."

Mason: Why do you think the current state of discussing or framing the future sits within this binary of either, "You're an eternal optimist - AI is going to save us, it's going to make us more intelligent about ourselves" or, "AI is going to be the thing that kills us, if it isn't nano-tech or if it isn't some sort of thing that falls from space or synthetic biology." Why do you think it has to sit across these two dichotomies? I've always felt that when Elon and Co. say that, "Oh AI is going to be our last invention," it sometimes feels like it's just really good marketing. I don't think that the technology is quite there yet, but if they instill that fear in people, they believe that the future is closer than it actually is. I think the future itself is being used as a form of leverage in a weird sort of way.

Webb: That's an easy question to answer. I would like to see a future in which we all still have agency, and my concern is that we are getting further and further away from a future in which each one of us has the ability to make decisions, and that's because we control less and less of the data - our own personal data.

We are further and further removed from the algorithms that both mine and refine and process that data, and we have very little insight into how decisions are being made on our behalf - when that's even happening. There's no transparency around how decisions are being made and that may not sound like a technical issue, however all of the technology that you use in your life whether that is your telephone, your smartphone, or your email or the game that you're playing...you have almost no say or control in how you use that device and how that device uses you.

The challenge is that the more our technology gets sophisticated in its approach, the closer that we move to a zero UI reality where things happen more seamlessly; the more that we are allowing people to programme machines to make machines to make decisions for us. That sci-fi future terrifies me more than anything I have seen on *Black Mirror*, because that's everyday life. So the best that I can hope for is that everybody starts thinking through the implications of all the technology that we have access to and comes to a unified decision that we are about to enable an enormous tragedy of the commons. *We* are the commons, right-and that we collectively decide that we want something better for ourselves.

Mason: Well on that note, Amy Webb, thank you for your time.

Webb: Thank you, this was a lot of fun.

Mason: Thank you to Amy for sharing her thoughts on how we can think more critically and deeply about the future. You can find out more by purchasing Amy's books, or downloading her open source forecasting tools at Amy Webb dot IO.

II. CONCLUSION

In this article we have said that If you like what you've heard, then you can subscribe for our latest episode. In this study as it work through futuristic novels and identification and her placement in it, provides fresh insights into Amy Webb's role and situation as a writer and locate her work within the dominant theories and critical practices of our time. This article proposes to study the most controversial factors of Amy Webb's writings namely her futuristic world, because it is this aspect of her works that has not yet been reviewed properly. This Article will true to strike a balance between the extreme eulogy and down write condemnation of her response to futuristic world.

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