The 'Narrative Turn' in developing foresight: Assessing how cultural products can assist organisations in detecting trends

Jan Oliver Schwarz

Aarhus University, Business and Social Sciences, Department of Business Administration, Bartolins Allé 10, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

When developing foresight, it is essential to consider the information on which this activity is based. Weak signals, also conceptualised as trends, can be considered the most relevant input for developing foresight in an organisation. While detecting weak signals has traditionally relied on the news media, cultural products such as literature, movies, art, or computer games appear to have been neglected in the practice of foresight.

However, literary genres such as novels can be a valuable source for developing foresight. Literature can be characterised as delivering "thick descriptions". Not only do novels describe social practices, but from them the reader also gains, for instance, deep insights into the feelings and emotions of the characters.

These thick descriptions are even more interesting in the context of foresight when one considers that these descriptions play a role in the construction of social reality and therefore can influence, over time, reality, or rather translate fiction into fact. It can be argued that the *new* departs from cultural products, before translating into widely accepted social practices or mass-market products. The value of using literature in foresight also appears to be related to the notion that these narratives can be read as scenarios, revealing the potential of literature. Because of their narrative structure, these scenarios can overcome cognitive barriers in the development of foresight.

1. Introduction

Although the relevance of detecting and responding early to trends appears to have been well stated, and corporations have been urged to develop foresight, from my perspective two questions remain to be answered: 1) what is a trend; and 2) where does one look for them. While considerable work has been done on describing trends (e.g. [1–3]) or weak signals (e.g. [4–6]), the focus of this essay shall be on the second question: the sources of trends. In particular I propose to use cultural products, such as literature, in developing foresight and think it is worthwhile to consider theses as sources in developing foresight.

It is interesting that the discussion of what sources to use for researching for trends is rather limited; this has not changed with more recent research on foresight (e.g. [7–9]). What is troubling to me, however, is that the process of development of foresight (e.g. [10–12]) does not assist organisations per se in actually developing foresight; the content generated through this process is what generates foresight for an organisation. This is for me the main rationale to further discuss the usage of cultural products in developing foresight.

2. A closer look at trends

When considering the sources for detecting trends, I think it is of relevance to start with a few thoughts on trends. Liebl [2] views a trend as a phenomenon which is always complex and which cannot be perceived simply as a fashion; its lifespan cannot be measured accurately. The argument has

been made that there are two essential aspects of diagnosing trends: invention and diffusion [1:316]:

- "First, how can the new be identified? And what constitutes this new? This refers to the aspect of *invention*.
- Second, will the new become widespread to a significant extent? This refers to the aspect of *diffusion*."

The aspect of invention also relates to that of *newness*. According to Groys [13], the fundamental characteristic of the new is that objects or concepts are transferred into another context. The invention, therefore, is best described by transgressing the boundaries of contexts, by connecting formerly separated contexts.

Rogers' [14] work on the diffusion of innovations can be considered as the point of departure for concepts such as a life cycle of trends [15] or "flock and flow" [16]. The premise of these concepts is that the *new* emerges from the fringe of society and diffuses, however not necessarily, over time to a mass-market phenomenon. What becomes of interest in this process of diffusion are the communication means involved. I would argue that cultural products are in this respect of interest because they are earlier involved into the process of diffusion than mass media.

However, mass media and media content analysis can be described as the common means for detecting trends [17–19]. This approach originated during World War II, when intelligence experts sought a method to obtain information on enemy nations. While this approach has been criticised, what appears to be missing in the literature, and in practice alike is a discussion of other sources of information.

An interesting point for departure is Liebl [20] who has contended that trends are not necessarily the result of research by institutions or trend scouts, but can be traced back to literature. He cites a number of trends, such as *Downnesting*, *Decade Blending*, *Lessness* or *McJobs*, which can be traced to Douglas Copland's [21] novel *Generation X*. Wacker and Matthews [15] and Molitor [22] have explicitly mentioned the role of literature in the early stages of a trend's life cycle. In this essay I will suggest that cultural products can be a valuable source for developing foresight.

3. The role of cultural products in the construction of reality

My argument is that the social construction of reality is based to a large extent on cultural products such as literature and movies. Czarniawska [23: 249] refers to "the constructive role of popular culture". According to Crotty [24: 58], "… social constructionism emphasises the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even the way in which we feel things!) and gives us a quite definite view of the world. This shaping of our minds by culture is to be welcomed as what makes us human and endows us with the freedom we enjoy."

In the context of the science fiction genre it has for instance been pointed out that these narratives can be used as science fiction prototypes [25–27]. Kirby [28] has described how film makers and science consultants have created cinematic representations of technological possibilities with the effect of stimulating the desire for these technologies among the audience, but also with an eye on generating funding opportunities for these technologies. "Fiction's lack of constrains and film-makers' creative assistance provides an open 'free' space to put forward speculative conceptualizations; it also amends these speculations within narrative that treats these ideas as already actualized within social context" [28: 66].

The relevance of cultural products in constructing reality becomes more evident if we focus on a single cultural product: literature. While there is only very little evidence that literature in general has been applied in developing foresight, some evidence exists in respect to science fiction literature, it has in other areas. Not only has literature, gained attention from scholars in consumer research, but also in organisational studies. Barry and Elms [29: 432] claim that "[as] a narrative form, strategy seems to stand somewhere between theatrical drama, the historical novel, futurist fantasy, and autobiography". In management education, de Monthoux and Czarniawska-Joerges [30: 2] note: "After all, reading novels is not very distant from using the 'case method' in some management schools."

My central argument is that the vast body of cultural products, and not only the science fiction genre, represents a large, interesting and mostly untapped source for developing foresight. DeMott [31: 134] argued some years ago in the *Harvard Business Review* in respect to developing foresight: "When business announces that what happens 'over there' in the arts and humanities isn't relevant, it's shutting its ears to priceless early warning systems, squandering information utterly unavailable elsewhere."

To underline my argument, I want to take a closer look at the potential contribution of literature to developing foresight. Foremost, literature offers what can be labelled as "thick descriptions" [32]. The following paragraphs will discuss the elements of these "thick descriptions" by referring to several aspects of literature.

In the context of developing foresight, literature can be characterised as a fictional narrative. While one can discuss if a narrative is fictional or is being treated as such [33], and of course discuss the controversy around the term 'narrative', I follow a practical approach. It appears to be functional to consider literature which is 1) relevant to developing foresight and 2) perceived as narrative fiction.

Literature has a social function. Authors both influence and are influenced by society. After the publication of Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* in 1787 the number of suicides among young men increased [34]. The work of French sociologist Tarde [35] on imitations further points to the relevance of this social effect of literature. Literature influences and reflects the *change of mentality* in a society [36]. Literature not only describes changes, it also contributes to those changes.

Further, literature can be perceived as *scenarios*. One characteristic of literature is that when reading a novel, for instance, the reader creates mental images about its plot, the setting or its protagonists. Pictures derived from fiction, dreams but also phantasmas shape our construction of reality. The Swiss historian Philipp Sarasin [37] has pointed out that Richard Preston's [38] *Cobra Event* played an important role in constructing a collective phantasma in the U.S. about bioterrorism, defining a phantasma as "a strong and very basic perceptual pattern, a sort of *idée fixe* that organises our world view" [37: 9].

By this basic mechanism, one can argue that scenarios are actually created when someone reads a novel. This allows us to link this creation of scenarios to the notion of the "Memory