



THE NETWORK FOR  
SOCIAL WORK MANAGEMENT

# FUTURES THINKING FOR POST-NORMAL TIMES: A NEW RESOURCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

Collective Imagination, Collective Intelligence, Collective Agility

Laura Nissen, Ph.D., LMSW, CADDC III  
Professor, Presidential Futures Fellow, Portland State University  
[nissen@pdx.edu](mailto:nissen@pdx.edu) @lauranissen

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# WELCOME TO THE FUTURE

- Start where we are – never has the idea of “post normal” felt more relevant.
- Normally, the #1 challenge futurists face is getting people to think about the future in a meaningful way...so we are in a bit of the “upside down” right now in terms of Covid.
- The definition of “post normal times” is:  
”All that was normal has now evaporated: We have entered post-normal times, the in-between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have not yet emerged, and nothing really makes sense. To have any viable future, we must grasp the significance of this period of transition which is characterized by the three c’s: complexity, chaos and contradictions. ” Zardar, 2010
- Begin this webinar with a moment of silence for all the lives lost due to covid-19.

# WHAT IS FUTURES THINKING?

Critical futures studies asserts that the present is fragile – merely the victory of one particular discourse – way of knowing – over another. The goal is to disturb present power relations through making our categories problematic and evoking other scenarios. To UNDEFINE the future.

Sohail Inayatullah, 2013

The greatest existential challenge facing the human species, can in part be traced, to the fact that we have underdeveloped practices for thinking possible worlds out loud.

Stuart Candy

# HONOR THE DISTRACTION OF OUR TIME

- Meet ourselves where we are and cultivate a capacity to move forward towards a better future we've created together
- Honor good work, meaningful work, useful work, energizing work
- Name "Pre-covid 19" thinking and "Post-covid 19" thinking and the transition we are all experiencing together
- My purpose/goal is to SPARK curiosity, passion and focus for you in your path ahead...in the future. Opportunities to make a difference as a social worker in the spaces I'm going to talk about today are PLENTIFUL. But you may not be "invited" yet – you may have to just show up, introduce yourselves and get involved. Once you do...you will be welcomed.

# A WORD ABOUT STAGES OF GRIEF IN A COVID-19 WORLD

Denial – this virus won't effect us

Anger – you're making me stay home and taking away my activities

Bargaining – OK if I social distance for 2 weeks everything will be better and we can go back to the way things were

Sadness – I don't know when this will end

Acceptance – This is happening and I have to figure out how to proceed/survive in it

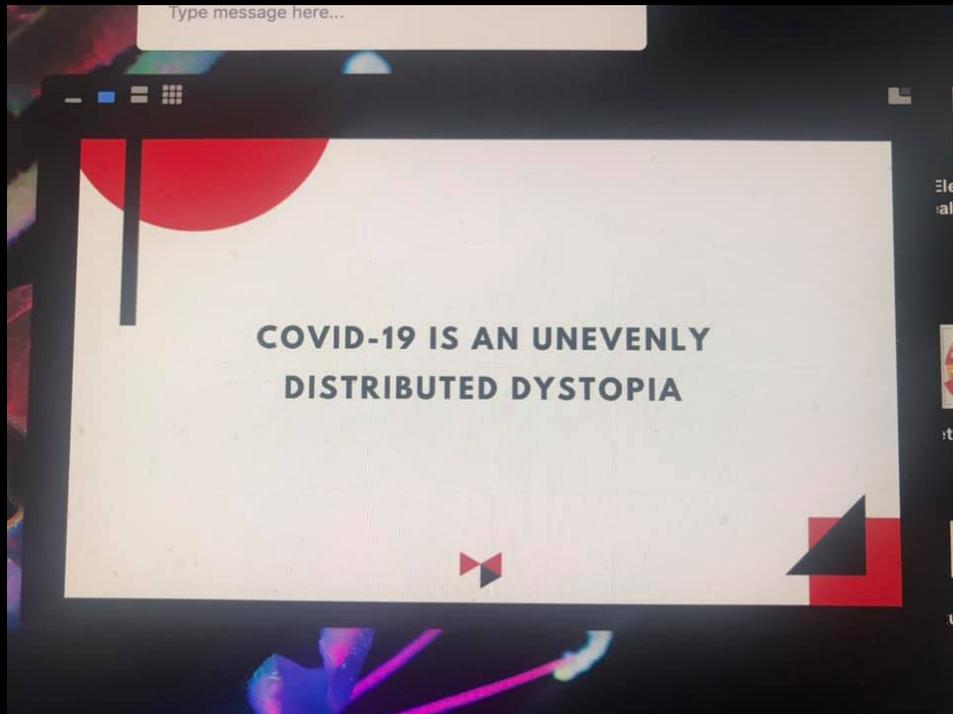
Meaning – we are all connected in ways that been deeply revealed and transformed

David Keller

# CENTRAL QUESTIONS RE THE COVID ERA

- ***How will Covid-19 change the world? History tells us that pandemics change history – how is this time going to change the ecosystem we live and practice within? What kind of world do we want to go back to? What choices will we have about that?***
- ***How will Covid-19 change us individually and in communities around the world? Expand us, evolve us, strengthen us, test us, challenge us, improve us, threaten us, force us? Let's allow this moment to envision what our evolution might look like to best meet the times we live in.***
- ***How can we start imagining and preparing for our role in recovery? There will be a need for healing like nothing we've experienced in our lifetimes. Are we ready?***

# COVID 19 LESSONS SO FAR - SIMPLY



(Image from futurist Leah Zaidi, 2020)

- The future is here (a future we worried about...and many predicted)
- The future is complicated and in many ways, unpredictable.
- The future is unevenly distributed.
- In order to navigate it, we probably need new ways to operate.
- Futures thinking provides that possible framework. Let's go.

# WELCOME TO THE FUTURE – THREE WEBINARS

The purpose of these webinars (over the next couple of weeks) is to formally “introduce” futures thinking to our profession and explore its goodness of fit with our social justice, equity and well-being goals – and share a little about how to get more involved!

Webinar One – (today) Futures thinking for post-normal times – A new resource for social work (What is it?)

Webinar Two – The process of foresight – how futures practice can enhance social work practice (how does foresight “work.”)

Webinar Three – Evolving on purpose: Possibility spaces for the future of social work practice and social justice

# HOW DID I GET HERE?

- 30 years of social work practice and education
- Specialized in addictions and systems change, innovation
- Early career experiences with futures thinking related to RWJF
- Seminal experiences with the ideas, versatility and agility that results with futures work as an alternative to strategic planning – more “flex”
- Last few years, have shifted my career to “all futures all the time” – gather and “learn out loud.” (Special thanks to Dean Nancy Smyth for encouraging me to do that!)
- Inspired, energized and activated (in a good way) by futures practice, the liberatory possibility of futures thinking and the global research/practice community.
- Devote the balance of my career to sparking interest for social workers to be fully PART of the futures community – we belong in these spaces AND to help get the profession of social work ready for what is ahead. [www.socialworkfutures.com](http://www.socialworkfutures.com)



LET'S GO!

# TODAY'S WEBINAR

- Deep breath and thinking about your own future and the concentric circles around you
- Overview of futures thinking, principles and practice
- Different ways futurists practice – focus and breadth
- Maps of the future
- Notable examples of futures thinking esp. relevant to social workers
- Ethics
- Notable examples of the future coming fast esp. relevant to social workers
- Artifacts of the future

# LET'S JUST THINK FOR A MINUTE ABOUT "THE FUTURE"

- Your future
- Your partner(s), family and close friends
- Your extended family
- Your job
- Your discipline
- Your disciplinary ecosystem
- Your city, state, Tribe, country, planet
- All changing and evolving in both predictable and unpredictable ways

# FUTURES THINKING IS:

- About deepening and strengthening the ability to “anticipate” and imagine in new ways.
- Commit to reducing “short-term-ism” in our immediate and extended circles of influence. How can futures thinking help us make better decisions? (Deeper commitment to exploring “unintended consequences” and “underdeveloped possibilities)
- Resisting powerful actors who “dictate” what the future is going to be in favor of increasing agency and democracy in co-constructing desired futures while protecting/resisting undesired futures.
- Not neutral – it is powerful. Who gets to wield that power? Is it democratic?

# WHAT FUTURES THINKING HAS TO OFFER RIGHT NOW

- Connect the past, present and the future
- Learn from the past, make sense of the present as we deal with it and connect both of these to an arc of meaning and the choices we have about what happens next.
- “Unlearn” our way of thinking about what is and isn’t possible. The veil between these things is especially porous right now.
- Critical, post-modern, anti-racist, anti-colonial, cultural, interpretive, participative, holistic
- Bow to Indigenous lens

# ARE YOU AN OPTIMIST OR A PESSIMIST ABOUT THE FUTURE?

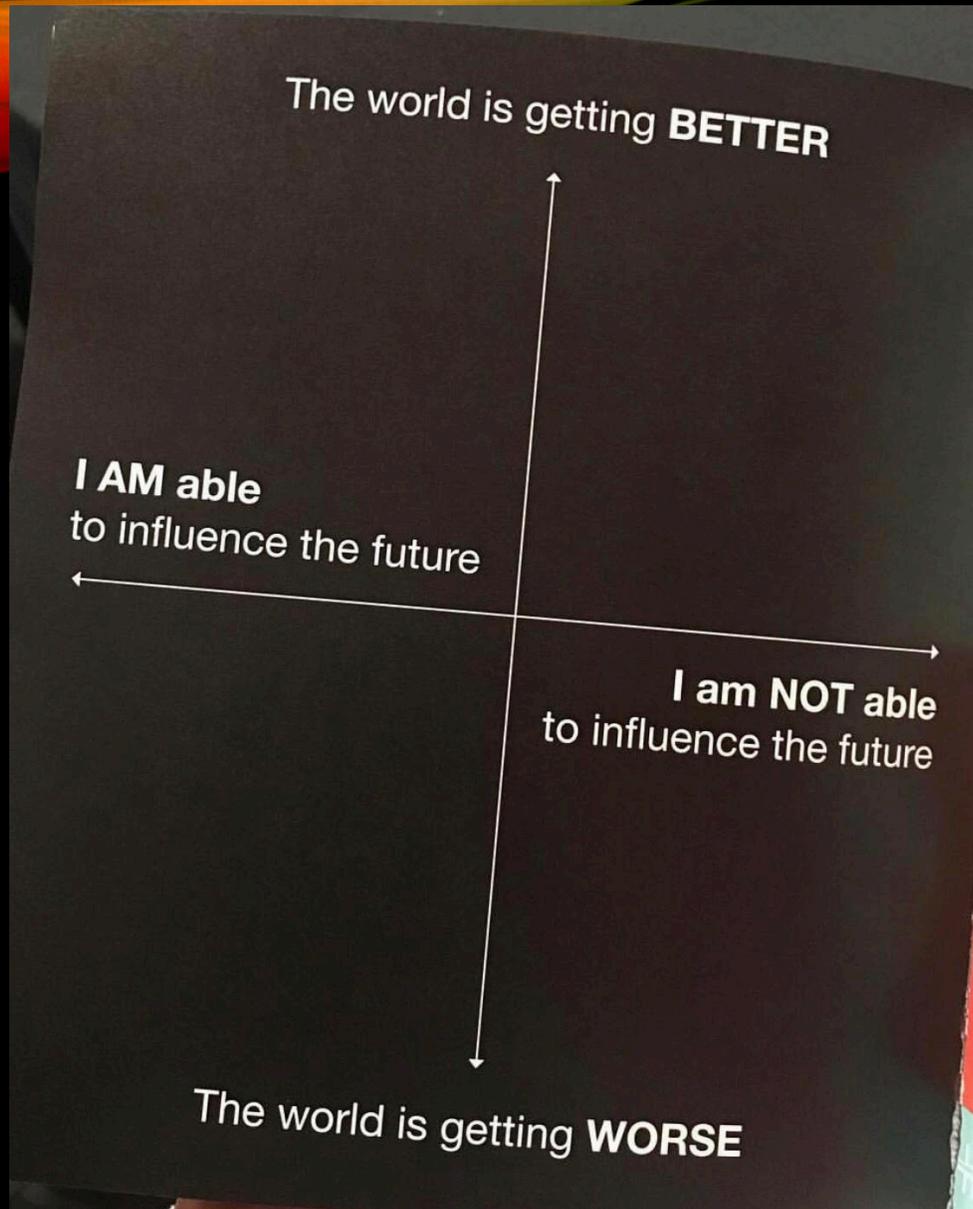
- Things are better than they've ever been
- Things are quite bad
- Things could get much, much worse

Yuval Noah Harari

# THE FUTURE WE WANT...

...doesn't arrive fully formed. We have to shape it... Amy Webb





What are the best ways of thinking about the future?

# PRINCIPLES OF THE FUTURE

- The future is plural (many scenarios possible)
- The future is a combination of alternative futures: possible, plausible, probable and preferable
- The future is open (not fixed)
- The future is fuzzy (of course we can't "know" exactly how the future will unfold, and our foresight is imperfect, limited).
- The future is surprising (not always smooth or continuous). Sometimes it arrives in unexpected ways.
- The future is not surprising (sometimes the future is boring).
- The future is fast (the future is always accelerating).
- The future is slow (accelerating change gets all the attention, but a balance of the future is also slow, plodding and predictable).
- Daniel Bengston (2018). Principles for thinking about the future and foresight education. *World Futures Review*, 10(3), 193-202.x\

# WHAT FUTURES WORK IS

- New(ish) discipline – (newer than sociology but does have more than a 50 year history).
- Managing “exponential” change – it isn’t linear any more.
- Philosophy, set of tools and skills.
- 1000’s of people around the world operating at futurists in a variety of traditions (public sector, private sector, transdisciplinarity)



# WHAT FUTURES WORK ISN'T AND A CRITIQUE

- Predicting (it is more like mapmaking and navigating)
- Controlling (not possible anyway) – put pushing for/towards futures we want – YES!
- (Futures folks I hang around with) not about dominating the sector with one voice or one vision. Not driven by current economic/political frameworks/goals.
- Futures work sometimes criticized for being elitist, supremacy-anchored/blinded. Can be valid but there are “schools” of futures work.
- I ascribe to critical futures thought: pluralist, disruptive, network-based, equity- human- and sustainability-centered. Constant power analysis. Iteratively challenging power relations in answer the question: “Who gets to define the future?” Democratizing futures thought and practice.

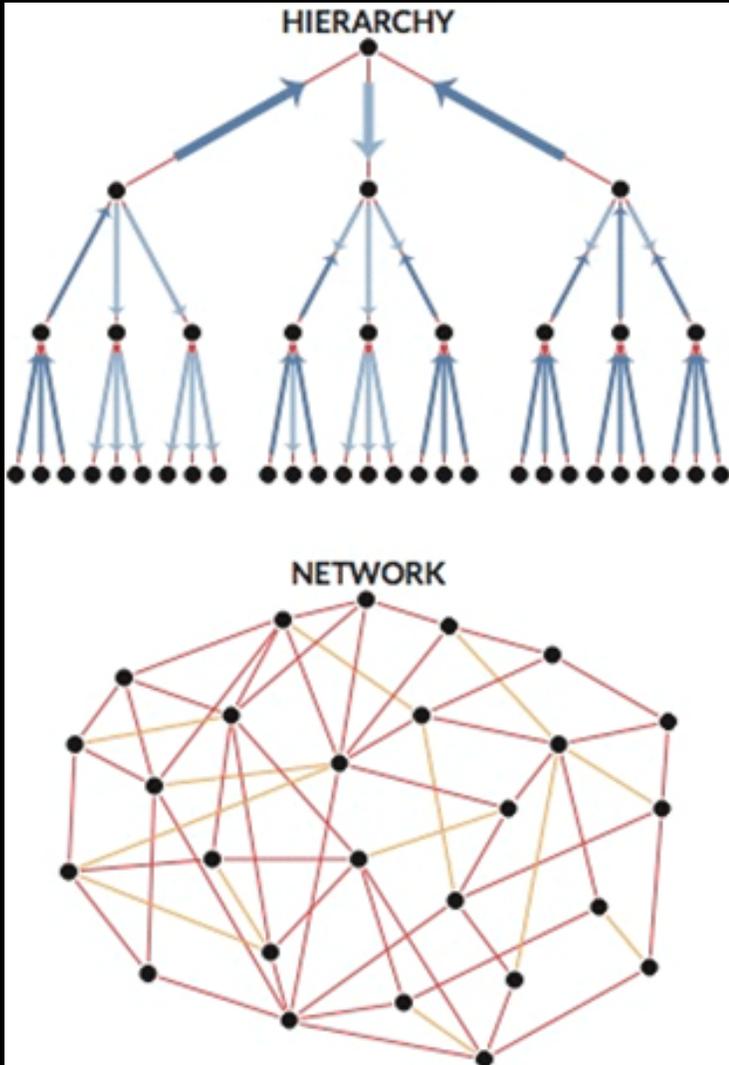
# HISTORY MATTERS IN FUTURES WORK

**History is merely a list of surprises. It can only prepare us to be surprised yet again.**

Kurt Vonnegut

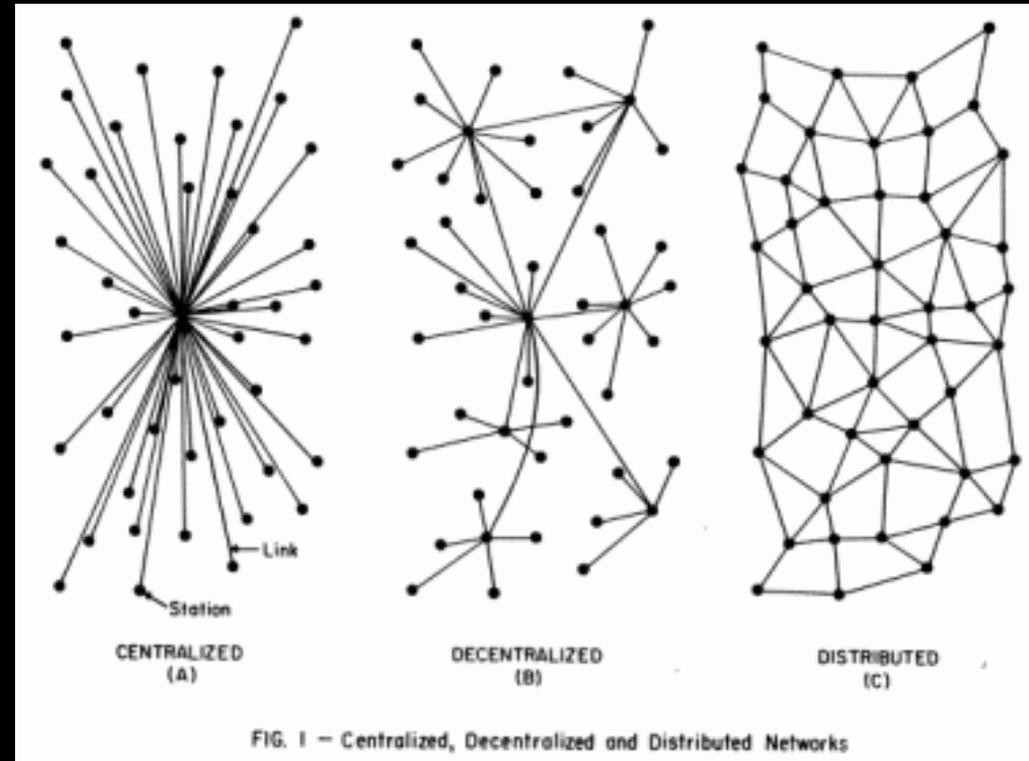
quotefancy

## Hierarchies vs Networks



# THE FUTURE OF POWER

## Types of Networks

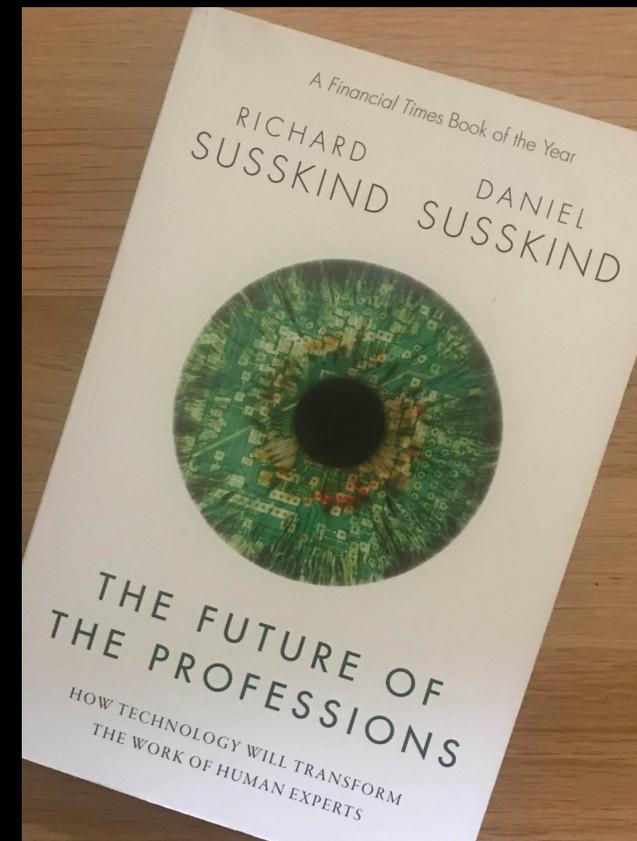


# THE FUTURE OF ISSUES

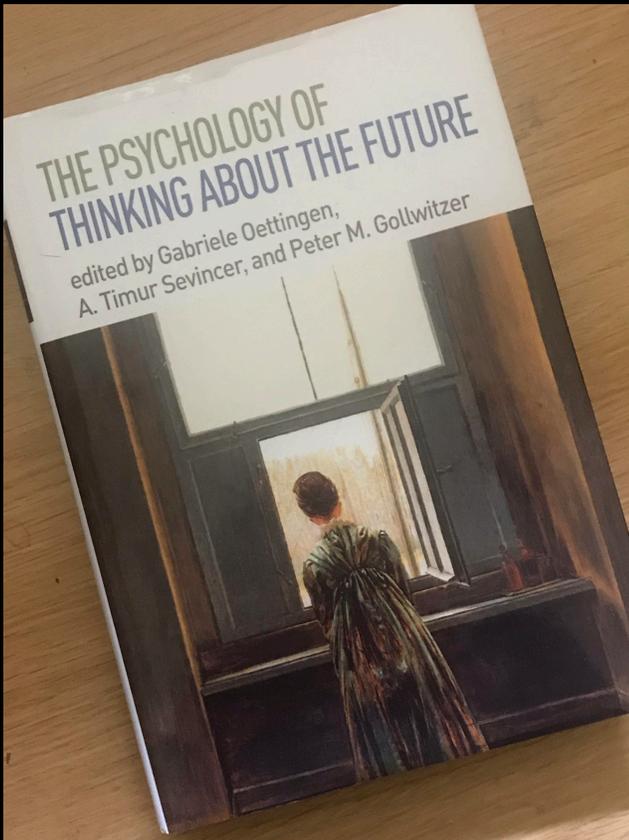
- Social change
- Work
- Organizational life
- Cities
- Technology
- Climate
- Food
- Communication
- Identity and human rights
- Racism and equity
- Family life
- Coupling and relationships
- Well-being (including both health and psychological)
- Religion and spirituality
- Trust
- Political life and democracy
- War (and peace)
- Not to mention “products” galore...

# THE FUTURE OF PROFESSIONS

- Medicine (both doctors, nurses and all health professions)
- Education (teachers - both in K-12 and higher education)
- Law
- Journalism
- Architecture
- Divinity



# FUTURES CONSCIOUSNESS



- Time perspective
- Agency beliefs
- Openness to alternatives
- Systems perceptions
- Concern for others

Ahvenharju, Minkkinen & Lalot, 2018

# FUTURES VOICES CHALLENGING DOMINANT NARRATIVES



# COUNT ON DISRUPTION FROM HERE FORWARD – AMY WEBB

TECH TRENDS REPORT  
2020

[HTTPS://FUTURETODAYINSTITUTE.COM/2020-TECH-TRENDS/](https://futuretodayinstitute.com/2020-tech-trends/)

## THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL WORK IS NOT JUST ABOUT SOCIAL WORK

NOTE: TRENDS VS. SIGNALS

### The 11 Macro Sources of Disruption

This simple tool shows the 11 sources of macro change that are typically outside a leader's control. Because technology is so intertwined with everyday life, it is shown as intersecting with all the other sources.



# VUCA WORLD – POST-NORMAL TIMES

**V**

**VOLATILITY**

subject to  
fluctuations  
and change

**U**

**UNCERTAINTY**

due to change,  
instability, and  
unavailable information

**C**

**COMPLEXITY**

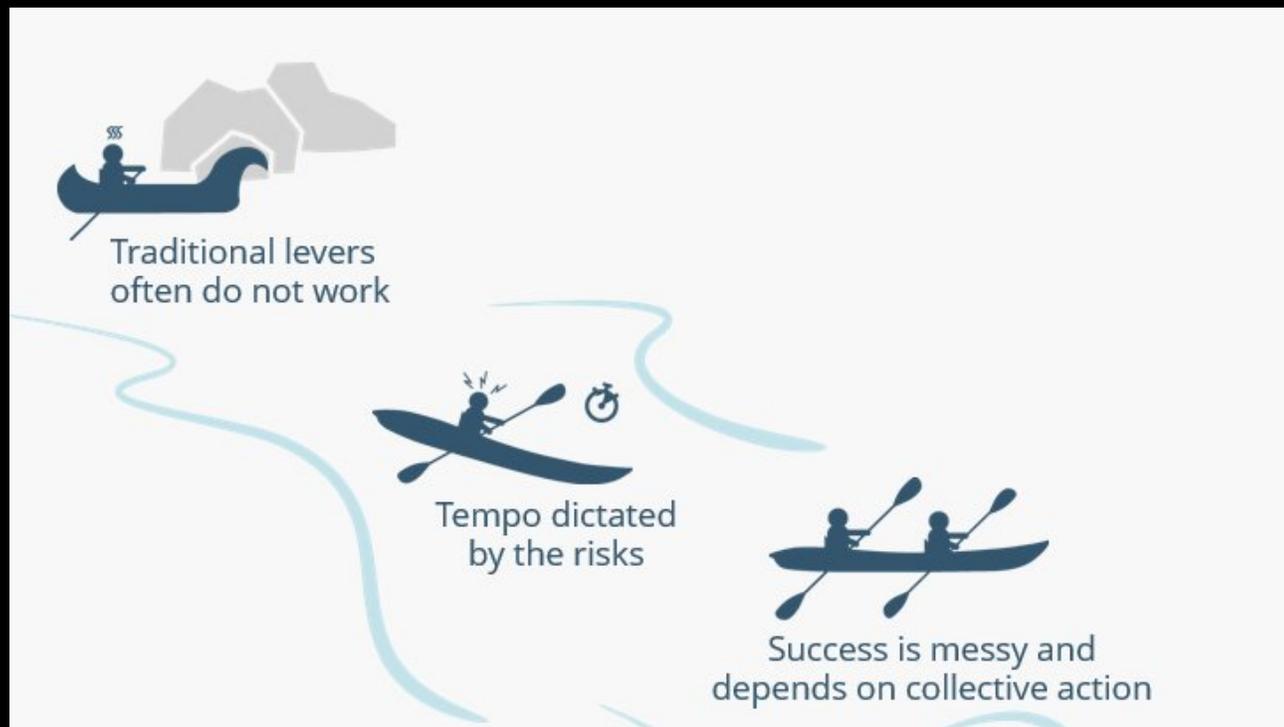
overwhelming  
in scope  
and variables

**A**

**AMBIGUITY**

multiple  
cause-and-effect  
factors

# WHAT IS AROUND THE NEXT CORNER AND ARE WE READY? OUR NARRATIVES MATTER....

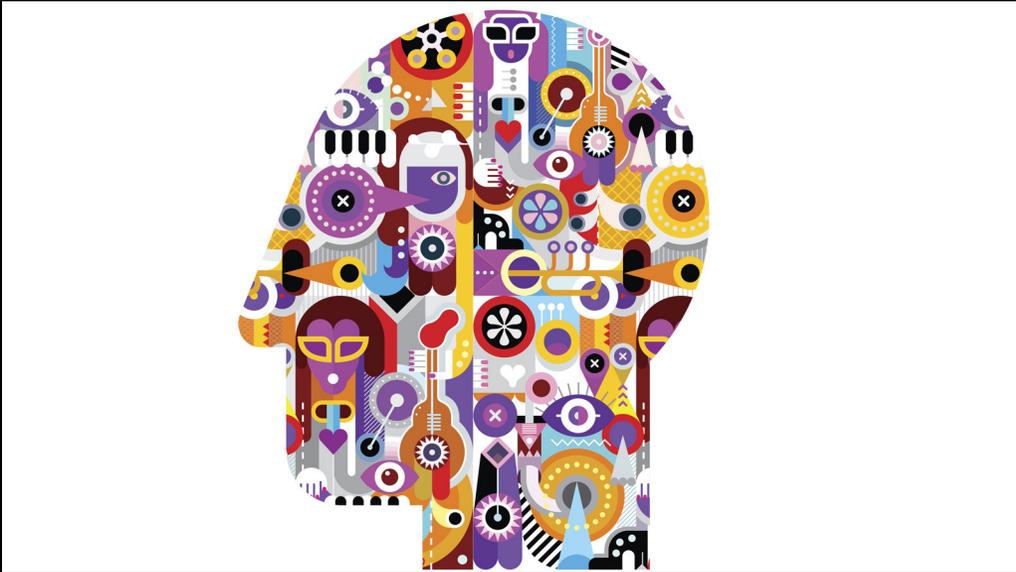


# VUCA - LEADERSHIP

The ability to flip from the frightening VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) to a hopeful VUCA (vision, understanding, clarity and agility) will be the ultimate dilemma for leaders in the future.

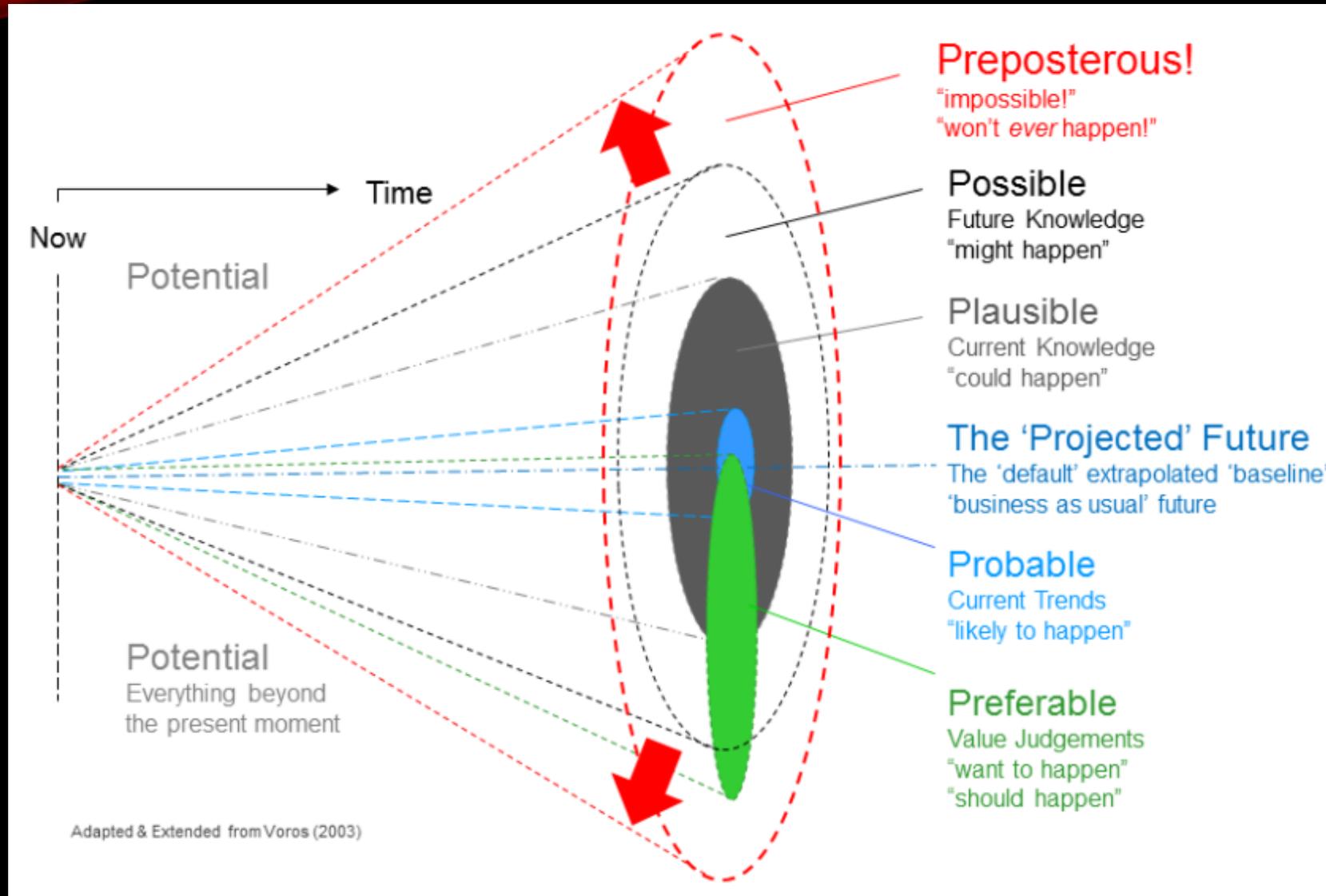
Bob Johansen

# BOTH SIDES OF THE BRAIN



- Use of data, quantitative information, linear progression of thought, rational and orderly sensemaking, logical futures lens
- Use divergent thinking, creativity, stretch exercises and their results, qualitative information, "undiscovered" and "nondominant" futures possibilities, more speculative
- Equally essential to engage in futures work.

# MAKING OUR MINDS MORE ELASTIC



# MY DEFINITION...

- Intentional, focused work to stretch perception, deepen capacity to anticipate in new ways to build collective imagination, intelligence, agency and agility with regard to the future. We do this to face real challenges together and feel more like co-creators of the future rather than passive bystanders.
- It's easy to think of futures work as "the future of this or that thing" but it is really bigger than any one sector. The future is really the interactions – the future of any one thing is the future of everything. Many futurists specialize in an area, but everything impacts everything.
- Big tent concept – extremely transdisciplinary.
- "Applied science fiction."
- Variety of schools, theories, perspectives – not just one way of doing foresight
- Thriving international community of practice – 1000's of people "at work" as futurists.
- Public and private sector engaged.

# FUTURES LANGUAGE AND PRACTICE

- Afrofuturism, Queer-Feminist-Crip, Latinx, Indig. futures
- Collapse psychology
- Managed retreat
- Precariat class
- De-growth
- Misfit economies
- Calm technology
- Global brain
- Resilience hubs
- Cyborg anthropology
- Panopticon
- Post-capitalism
- Democracy 2.0.

Also – future of work, future of well-being, and more....

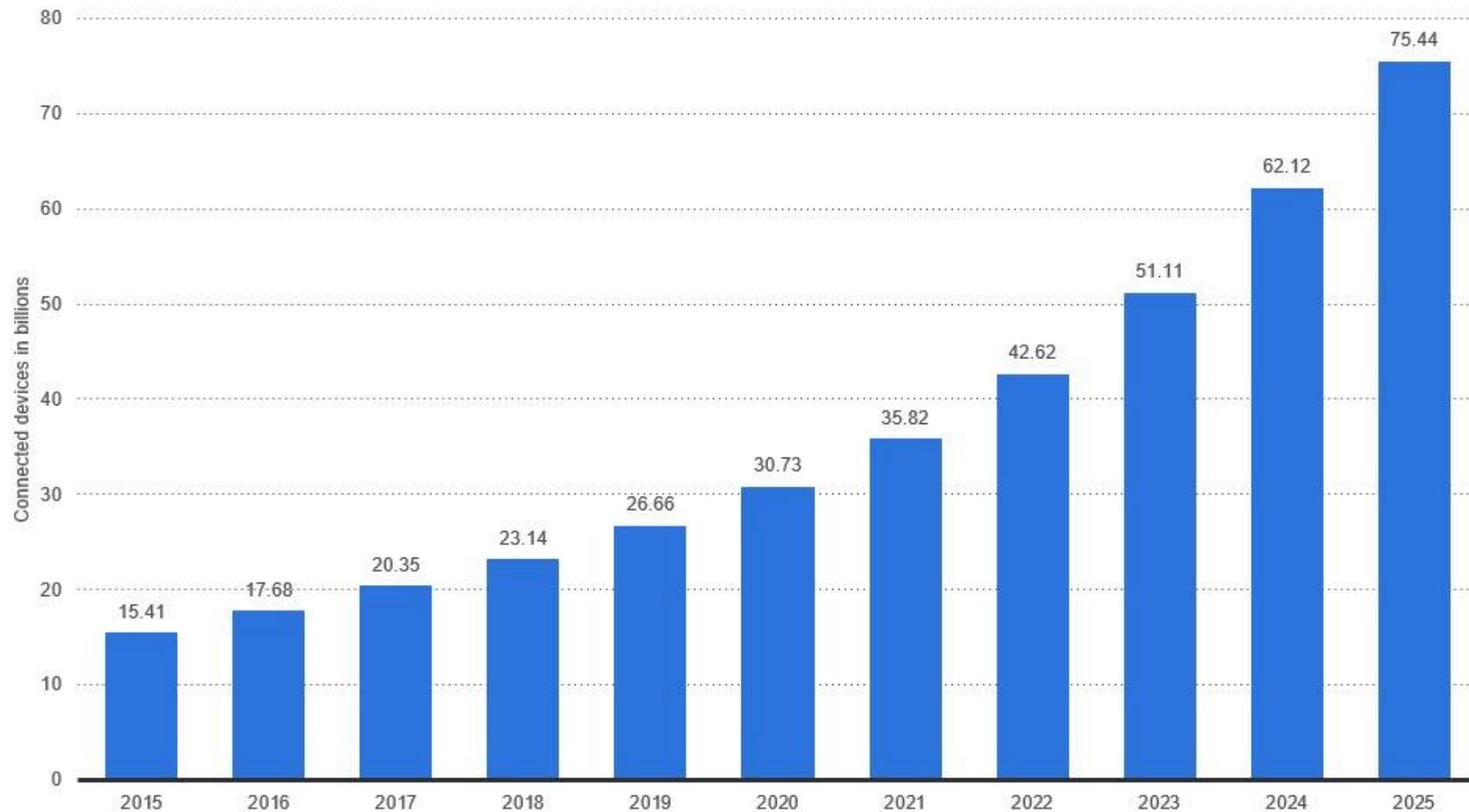
*All of these things were happening BEFORE covid-19 and will of course be complicated and will proceed in expected and unexpected ways.*

*Futures work can be great at Helping us map possibilities and imagine different ways that might go.*



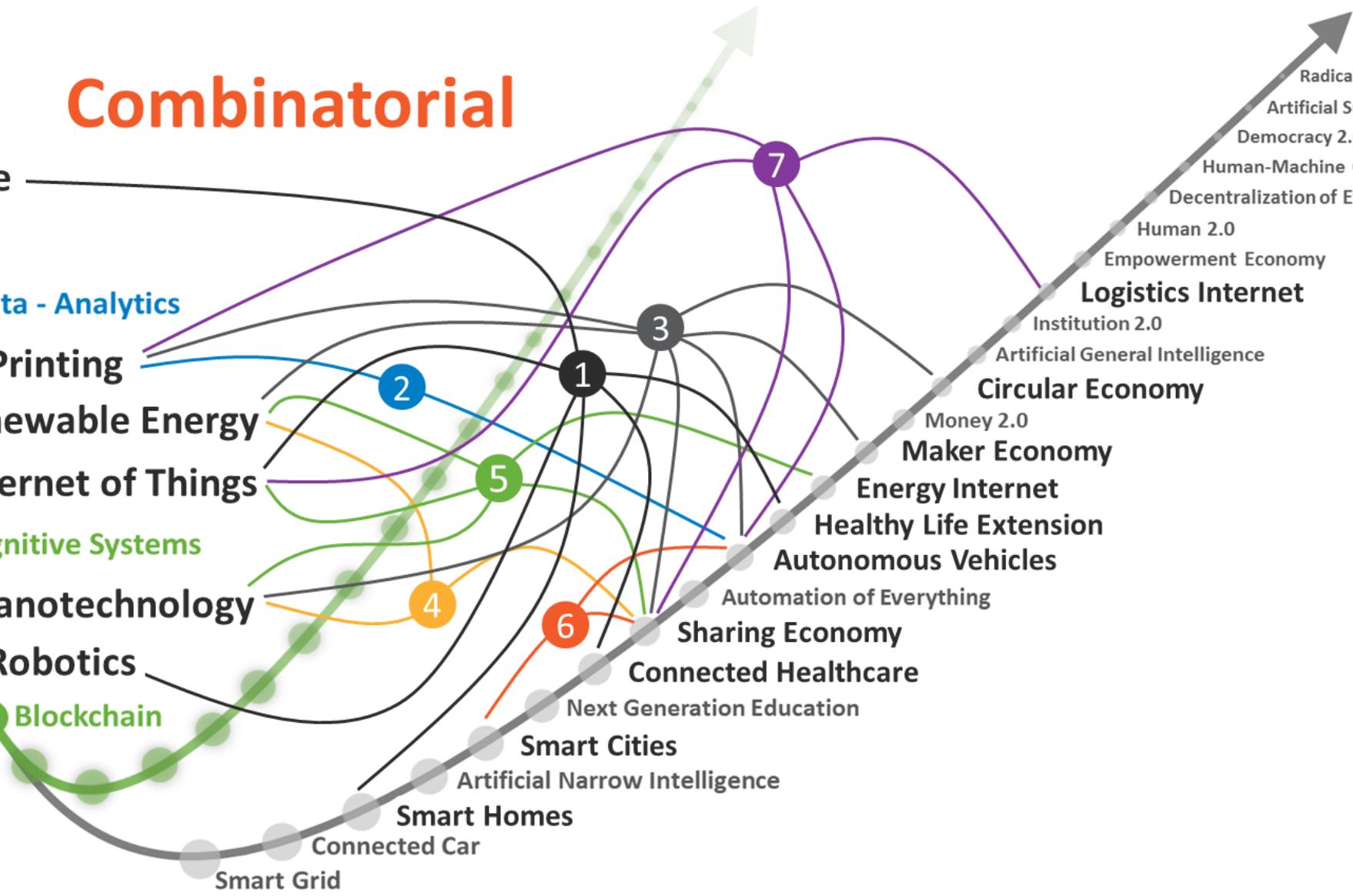
VISUALIZING THE  
FUTURE...

## Internet of Things (IoT) connected devices installed base worldwide from 2015 to 2025 (in billions)



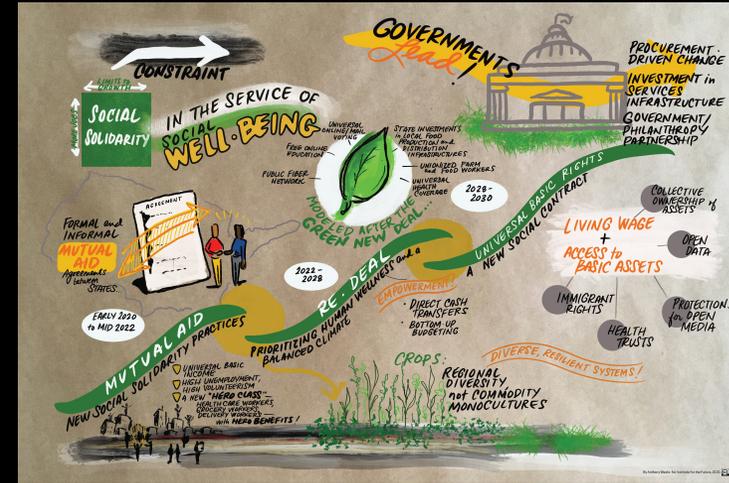
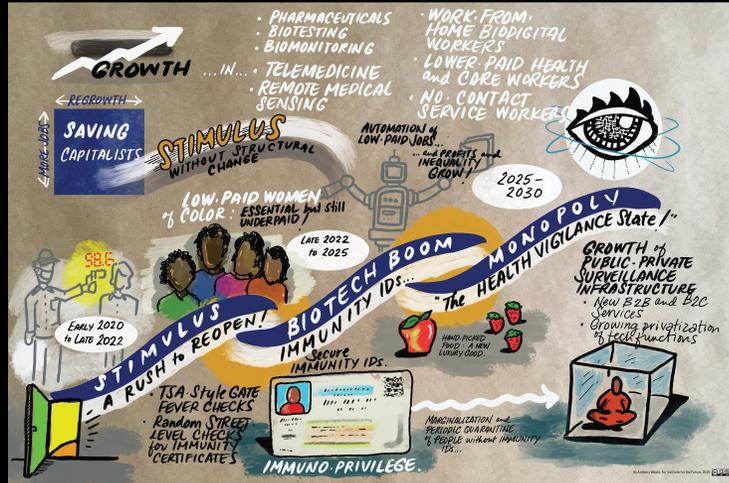
# Combinatorial

- Internet
- Social
- Mobile
- Cloud
- Big Data - Analytics
- 3D Printing
- Renewable Energy
- Internet of Things
- Cognitive Systems
- Nanotechnology
- Robotics
- Blockchain



- Radical Life Extension
- Artificial Super Intelligence
- Democracy 2.0
- Human-Machine Convergence
- Decentralization of Everything
- Human 2.0
- Empowerment Economy
- Logistics Internet**
- Institution 2.0
- Artificial General Intelligence
- Circular Economy**
- Money 2.0
- Maker Economy**
- Energy Internet**
- Healthy Life Extension**
- Autonomous Vehicles**
- Automation of Everything
- Sharing Economy**
- Connected Healthcare**
- Next Generation Education
- Smart Cities**
- Artificial Narrow Intelligence
- Smart Homes**
- Connected Car
- Smart Grid

# INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE'S NEW POST COVID SCENARIOS – WWW.IFF.ORG



# THE FUTURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

COMPUTERS

## Four new human rights proposed to protect us from mind reading and brain hacking



Michael Irving | April 27, 2017



Researchers have put forward four new potential human rights relating to neuroscience: the

- The right to cognitive liberty
- The right to mental privacy
- The right to mental integrity
- The right to psychological continuity

Michael Irving, 2017

# THE RIGHT TO COGNITIVE LIBERTY

An individual's mind is where they make all of their personal decisions relating to what they believe, say and do, and the researchers propose that this should be preserved as a fundamental human right.

Organizations and governments should not be able to "forcibly manipulate the mental states, and implicitly the brain states of individual citizens," and people should have the right to refuse coercive uses of neurotechnology.

# THE RIGHT TO MENTAL PRIVACY

- Thanks to the internet, our personal information has never been more public, but what happens when organizations or governments are able to record data straight from our brains?
- We don't always have direct control over our thoughts, and as the researchers point out, even if someone has consented to an EEG scan, the device could pick up far more information than the person wanted to share.
- The team's idea of mental privacy could be satisfied by ensuring that these devices can only read the brainwaves that the person explicitly agrees to, and the information gathered should be protected from leaking all over the internet.
- That's particularly important because our thoughts are about as personal as information can get, and the inextricable link to our identity might make it impossible to keep that data completely anonymous.

# THE RIGHT TO MENTAL INTEGRITY

- If a shady third party is messing around with your computer without your knowledge, it could corrupt the data.
- Now imagine that the "computer" is your brain – corruption there could, literally, crash your brain.
- Brain-computer interfaces are already coming into use for prosthetics that can be controlled through thought, meaning that patients come to think of them as their own limbs.
- But these devices could be remotely accessible, which would be as disturbing as if some unknown person suddenly seized control of your left hand.
- To protect people from that horror story, and the possible slippery slope towards brain-washing, the paper puts forward mental integrity as a human right.

# THE RIGHT TO PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTINUITY

- People build their identity on memories and thoughts, and neuroscience is already beginning to uncover ways to actively alter these things.
- Memories can be implanted or erased, potentially leading to behavioral changes (either deliberately or through carelessness), which could result in people losing their sense of self.
- Preserving this is what the researchers call a right to psychological continuity.

Note: Another related news item recently is that with rapidly expanding facial recognition technology we should all be copyrighting our face prints.

# DESIGN JUSTICE

- Framework for analysis of how design distributes benefits and burdens between various groups of people. *Design justice focuses on the way that design reproduces or challenges the matrix of domination (white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, ableism, settler colonialism, and other forms of structural inequality).* Design justice is also a growing community of practice that aims to ensure a more equitable distribution of design's benefits and burdens; meaningful participation in design decisions; and recognition of community-wide and Indigenous, and diasporic design traditions, knowledge and practices, p. 23.

Sasha Constanza-Chock, 2020

# ALGORITHMIC RACISM

- With emerging technologies, we might assume that racial bias will be more scientifically rooted out. Yet rather than challenging or overcoming the cycles of inequity, technical fixes too often reinforce or even deepen the status quo, p. 5.
- “The New Jim Code” – the employment of new technologies that reproduce existing inequities but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era, p. 6.
- “Coded inequity” – digital caste system that preys on our naivety, p.11
- Racism then becomes doubled – magnified and buried under layer of digital denial, p. 12.

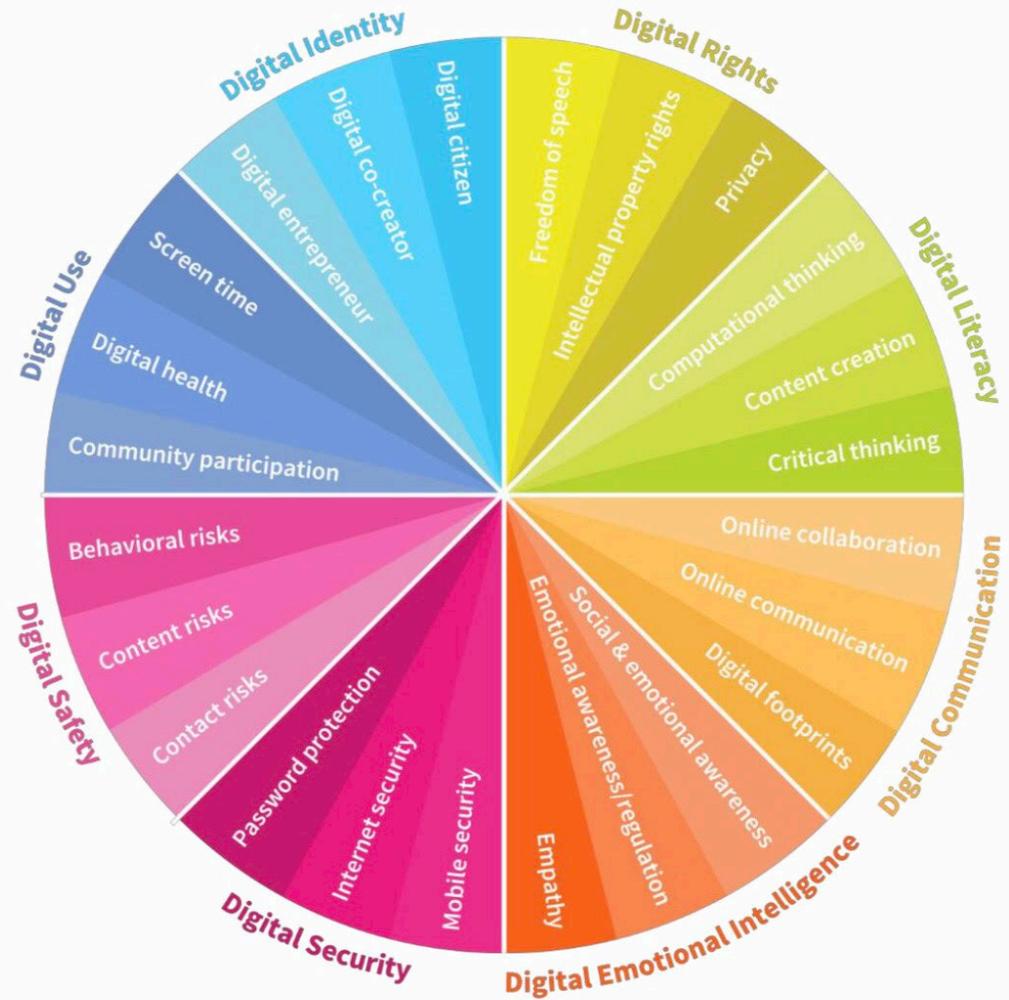
Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology*, 2019

# ETHICS AND THE FUTURE

- Our obligation to future generations.
- To not regret the things we build – Jane McGonigal (Ethical OS).
- To be transparent about how and why we work as futurists.
- To promote human and planetary well-being.



# COMPLEXITIES OF THE DIGITAL LIFEWORLD



# THE ROBOTS ARE HERE...



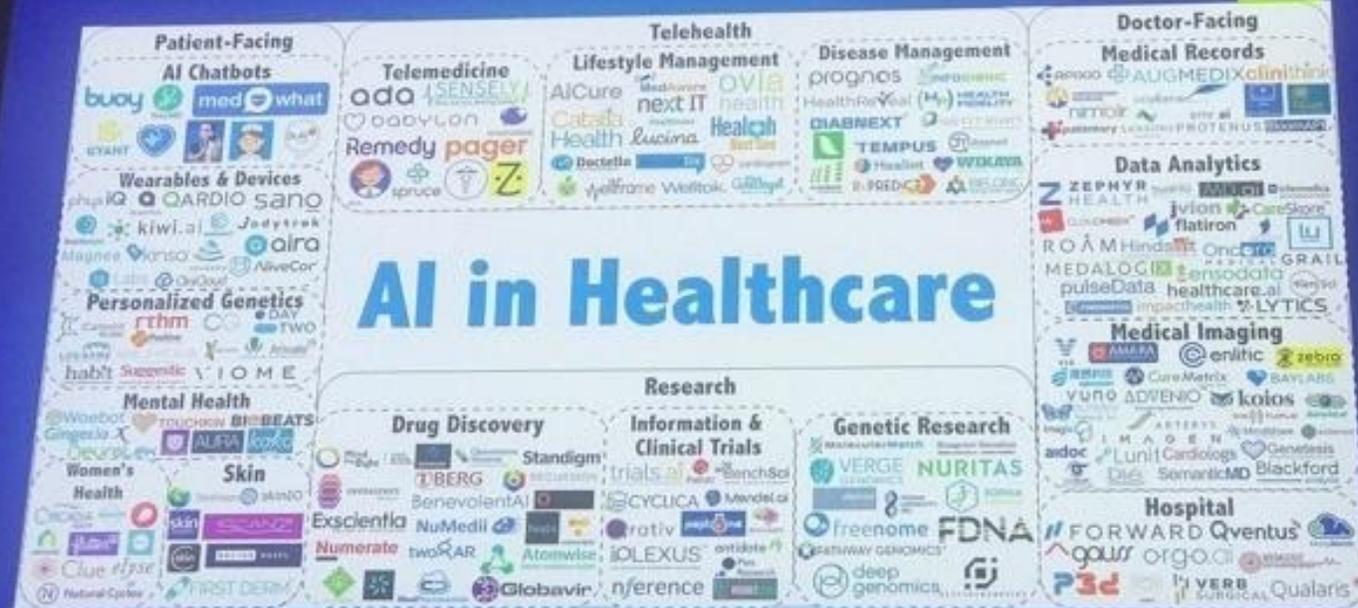
# HOW ABOUT DIGITAL HUMANS?



Soul Machines...



# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE/FUTURE OF HEALTH



# CLIMATE CHANGE AND HUMAN LIFE



# AND OF COURSE...NOW EVERYTHING INTERSECTS WITH COVID 19



**No we are  
not all  
in the  
same boat.  
We are in the  
same storm.  
There is a huge  
difference.**



**SHIT'S ON FIRE, YO**



When you try to keep your optimism  
after everything goes wrong



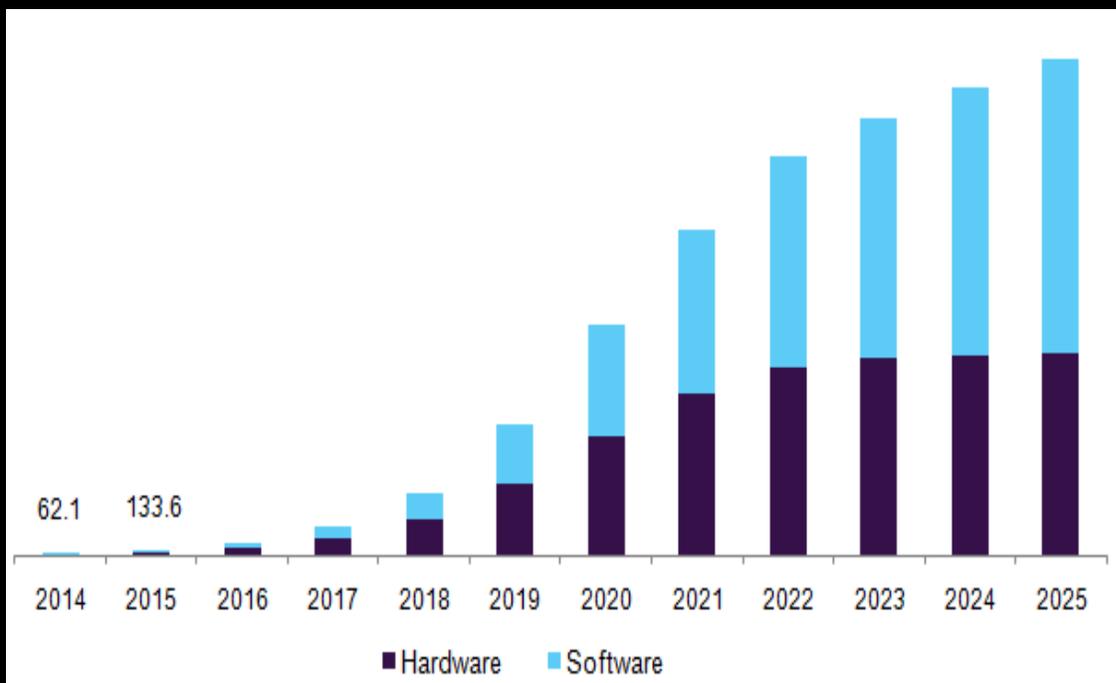
Deep breath...



# PLAYING WITH IDEAS...

“Artifacts of the Future” as a Tool (this is a preview of the next webinar – “how futures practice ‘works’”)

Take virtual reality as a case in point – how many of you have ever done VR?



# WHO WILL BE DISRUPTED BY VR?

- Retail
- Military/Defense
- Marketing and advertising
- Law enforcement
- Recruiting
- Agriculture
- Sports
- Education
- Energy
- Manufacturing
- Health care
- Journalism
- Film and entertainment
- Construction
- Real estate
- Automotive
- Space exploration
- Engineering

# NURTURE POD



- What led up to this being a practice?
- Who decided this was a good idea?
- Who is at risk and what kind of risk from this future?
- Who benefits from this practice?
- What would the social work code of ethics say about the nurture pod?
- Is this a future you want to live in?

(Nurture Pod Artifact from the Future by Stuart Candy)



# WHAT ABOUT THIS FUTURE?

- Would you like to live in this future?

# DYSTOPIAN FUTURES ARE “EASY”

What other options? Envision...

- Breakthrough pro-humanity, pro-ecological political movements - green revolution
- Global mutual aid networks
- Youth movements
- Care movements
- Indigenous rights revolution
- Renaissance of equity
- Scientific breakthroughs for global flourishing
- Post-capitalism economic frameworks
- Renaissance of meaning

## WHERE DOES SOCIAL WORK BELONG IN FUTURES THINKING/PRACTICE?

- How might social work be changed by inclusion of futures work/frameworks in our “core knowledge base?”
- How might we change futures work by our presence and input?

# FUTURES PRACTICE FOR SOCIAL WORK – SOME KEY QUESTIONS - PART ONE

- What is the future of how inequity will emerge in new spaces in new ways?
- What core knowledge do social workers need to better anticipate what might be coming next in the “social/political environment” and be effective in creating more equity? How is this like/unlike our current knowledge?
- How can the “moral imagination” that social work brings to the world – be especially valuable in navigating change?

# FUTURES PRACTICE FOR SOCIAL WORK – SOME KEY QUESTIONS - PART TWO

- How will transitions between eras (future of work, future of technology, future of health, etc.) impact vulnerable people and who is advocating in this area?
- What are the most likely ways that social work itself will be (should be?) changing in the years ahead?
- How do we protect what is most important about our profession as the future marches on? Where do we need most to grow?



# THE PANDEMIC IS A PORTAL

*Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.*

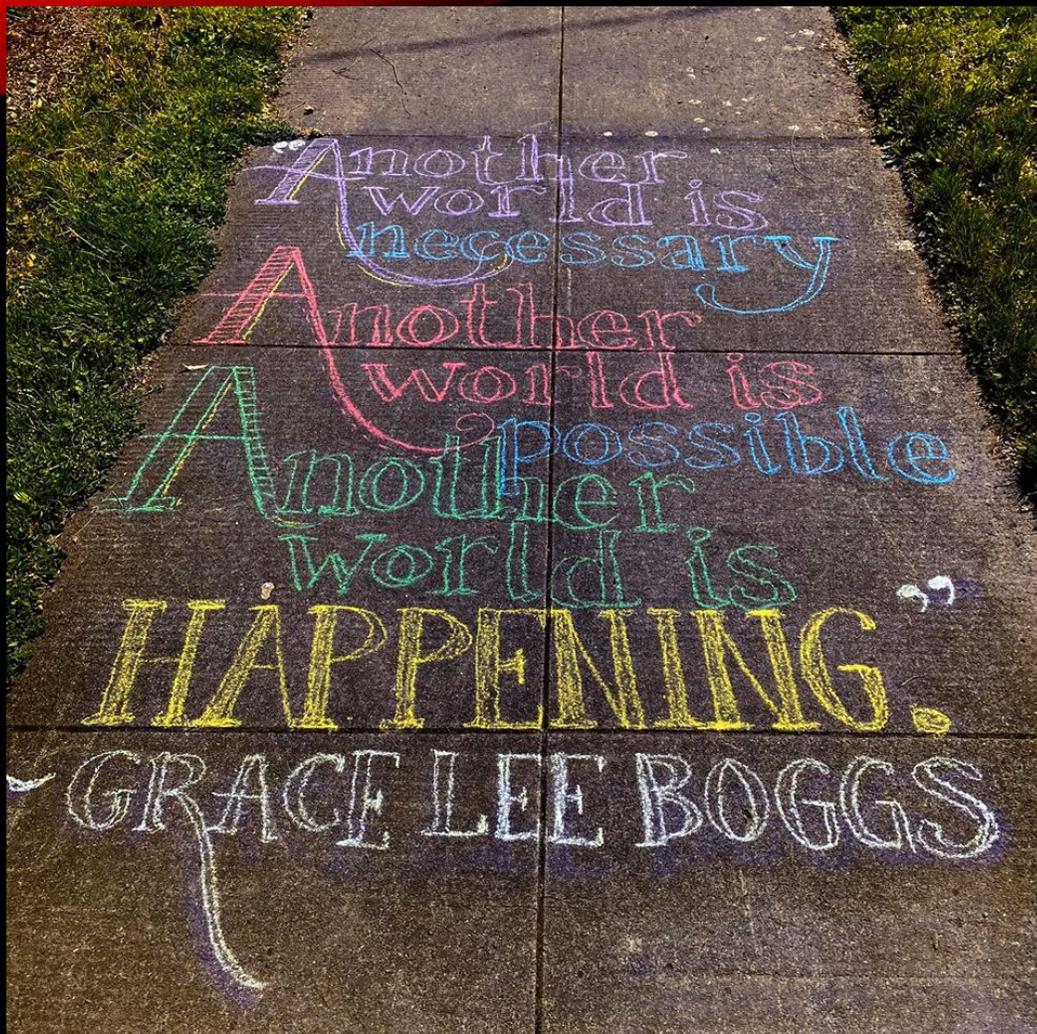
Arundhati Roy

# YOUR REACTIONS...

When you think about the future...what makes you:

- Anxious?
- Excited?
- Angry?
- Scared ?
- Curious?

# IN CLOSING



What kind of story will we write about what happens next?

Social workers and the people we work with, belong in futures spaces – contributing, learning and co-creating.

Come to the next session and find out “how” futures practice works!

Thanks to National Network of Social Work Managers, Fordham University and Portland State University.

Stay connected!

[www.socialworkfutures.com](http://www.socialworkfutures.com)

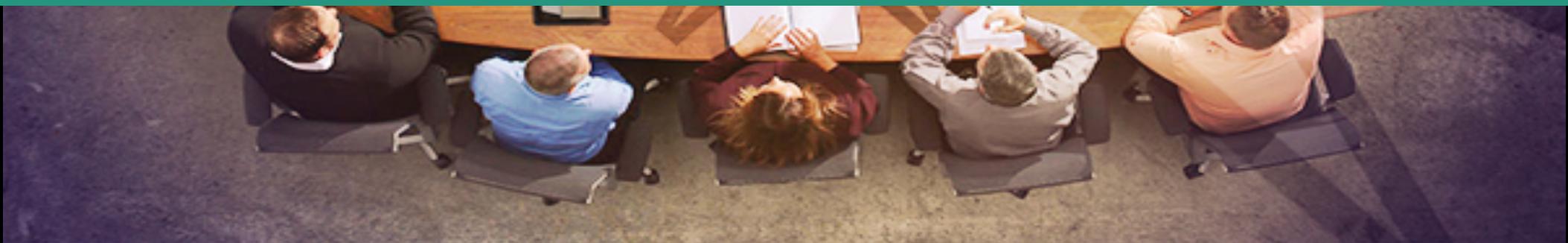
Twitter @lauranissen

#SWcovid19

#SWfutures



Thank you for your participation



Contact us

213.553.1870  
905 E. 8th St.  
Los Angeles, CA 90021  
info@socialworkmanager  
.org