

In Forecasting, “Mini” Is Big

By David Pearce Snyder

Technology forecaster John Vanston explains why trends that are less than “mega” are very much worth watching.

Minitrends would have merited an enthusiastic review solely for having introduced a useful new term-of-art for the futurist’s toolbox. But the book offers much more than that. In *Minitrends*, Technology Futures Inc. chairman John Vanston (writing with TFI’s media and marketing director, Carrie Vanston) has distilled insights and techniques developed over a highly successful 40-year career in technology forecasting into a 189-page do-it-yourself guide to the early identification of those emerging developments that eventually become the “next big things.”

Vanston explicitly offers this guidance for three different levels of users: (1) individuals and group practices, (2) small and medium-sized enterprises, and (3) large firms. This “tracking” of content continues throughout the book, and is, in my experience, a unique (and highly desirable) feature in a book on futures methodology.

The author defines “minitrend” as any trend—technical, social, economic, demographic, legal, etc.—that is just beginning to emerge and that, although not yet acknowledged by the media or the marketplace, has the potential to become nationally significant within two to five years. Eliciting such potentially valuable foresight out of today’s information maelstrom requires considerable self-discipline and commitment, but is an intellectual pursuit well worth the effort.

The book is roughly divided into thirds. The first third describes how minitrends fit into the perceptual frameworks by which futurists view the world and presents a detailed guide to public sources where evi-

dence of minitrends may be gleaned, gauged, and validated.

Vanston’s next three chapters spell out how different types of practitioners can make use of minitrends. Examples of current market-changing developments are offered for each scale of enterprise. Finally, the last four chapters deal with practical steps to take marketplace advantage of minitrends.

While this book is specifically about a futures research methodology, it is also an unabashed business book. The authors’ expressed purpose in writing *Minitrends* was to enable entrepreneurs at every level of the workplace to take advantage of the foresight that they, themselves, can gather from the “infosphere.”

Throughout the book, Vanston enlivens his narrative with dozens of vignettes from his decades of practice as a tech forecaster. A valuable side benefit of reading *Minitrends* is discovering the diversity of clientele and assignments that characterizes contemporary applied futurism.

The author reminds us (several times) that the “Minitrend Adventure” is not just a step-wise process; it’s a mind-set that must be maintained at all times, especially now that we are passing through a period of accelerating technical, economic, and demographic change. One minitrend can be trumped by another—or redoubled! The commercial marketplace is complex, volatile, and difficult to anticipate. For this reason, much of the final four chapters of the book deal with selecting specific minitrends for marketplace action, developing an “exploitation scheme,” and putting the scheme into action.

Sample Minitrends

Minitrends for Individuals

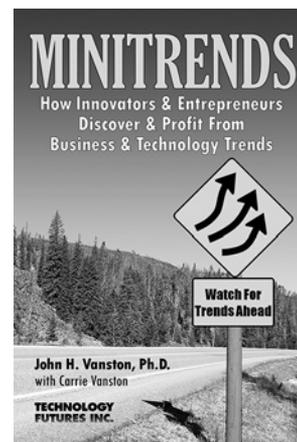
- Expanding involvement in virtual worlds.
- Support for people working at home.
- Expanding capabilities of advanced Web sites.

Minitrends for Small and Medium-Sized Companies

- Increased interest in privacy.
- New approaches in giving and receiving advice.
- Evolution of meaningful maturity (i.e., redefining retirement).

Minitrends for Large Companies

- Advances in digital manufacturing.
- Increasing use of electricity in industrial processes.
- New applications of nanotechnology.



Minitrends: How Innovators & Entrepreneurs Discover & Profit from Business & Technology Trends by John Vanston, with Carrie Vanston. Technology Futures Inc. 2010. 189 pages. Paperback. \$19.95.

While corporate readers will no doubt be interested in the author’s lucid depiction of the process by which futurists help institutions come to terms with the need for innovation and change, it is the first four chapters that offer the most exciting potential for the future. In those chapters, *Minitrends* portrays the learnable mind-set of futures research, not on the basis of visionary principles or rigid rules, but in attitudes, in habits of thinking about the world, and in the collective events of daily life that make up the forecastable continuities of human enterprise.

The patterns of thought that Vanston describes, the modalities by which emerging trends manifest themselves, and where to find corroborative information are discussed in such straightforward, jargon-free language that anyone with a college degree could use the first four chap-

ters of *Minitrends* as a primer for teaching himself or herself to become a competent trend spotter: i.e., applied futurist.

Because the early identification of emergent long-term trends poses such enormous marketplace value, it seems not improbable that traffic in minitrends will become a significant online phenomenon during the next two to five years. I am also prepared to believe that much of that traffic will be generated by freelance futurists who learned their trade by reading this book.

About the Reviewer

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Reviewer's disclosure: I have known John Vanston since 1973, and during the first 15 years of our respective careers, we collaborated on projects for a number of clients. He asked me to assess a pre-publication copy of *Minitrends* and to provide an "endorsement" to put on the flyleaf of the book. While critiquing the work of a friend and colleague is fraught with awkward possibilities, my review rests entirely on the merits of the book. —DPS

Foresight Across National Borders

By Rick Docksai

Experts seek global answers for global problems.

Human society could grow vastly healthier, more peaceful, and more prosperous later this century, or it could be devastated by ecological damage and domestic strife, according to the *2010 State of the Future*, by Jerome Glenn, Theodore Gordon, and Elizabeth Florescu, scholars of the futures-studies think tank Millennium Project. The report calls for

decision makers to become more collaborative and responsive to change.

"The world has the resources to address its challenges. What is not clear is whether the world will make good decisions on the scale necessary to really address the global challenges," says the report.

Like the other annual *State of the Future* reports that preceded it, this year's edition combines input from experts across the globe to measure the world's progress on benchmarks of human health, political freedom, safety, conflict resolution, education, and environmental welfare.

On the plus side, the 2010 report notes clear signs of recovery in most economies from the 2008 recession. In addition, the explosive growth of the Internet and mobile-phone-based Web technology is a boon for inter-continental communication and cultural exchange.

Many other quality-of-life factors are trending positive: Poverty rates are falling in most parts of the world; wars are fewer in number; and literacy rates, women's representation in government legislatures, and life expectancies are all on the rise.

The report cites other trends that are cause for alarm, however. For example, climate change is occurring more rapidly and more dramatically than anticipated. Also, as the information economy grows, so do the volumes of electronic waste discarded into the environment. Moreover, communities on every continent suffer unacceptably high rates of organized crime activity, violent crime, and violence against women.

Fostering the positive trends while minimizing or reversing the harmful ones will require "trans-institutional decision-making" processes that bring together as much expert opin-



2010 State of the Future by Jerome C. Glenn, Theodore J. Gordon, and Elizabeth Florescu. The Millennium Project. 2010. 88 pages, paperback, with 7,000 pages on CD-ROM. \$49.95.

ion as possible in minimal time, according to the report. Global, national, and local systems must work together to anticipate disruption and navigate challenges.

"There are many answers to many problems, but we are flooded with so much extraneous information every day that it is difficult to identify and concentrate on what is truly relevant," says the report.

Technology may be a valuable bridge. The report describes South Korea's Climate Change Situation Room, which receives insights and research data from climatologists worldwide into a central information system. Situation Room staff researchers analyze the entered data, tag it, annotate it, and link it. The end result is a synthesis of expert advice on best responses to the changing climate.

The Early Warning System with SOFI Capability, in use by the prime minister of Kuwait, is another promising system. It uses the Millennium Project's own Real-Time Delphi software to continuously survey experts inside Kuwait and across the globe on the variables that they deem most critical to ensuring a better future for Kuwait.

The Real-Time Delphi program even combines all the factors to calculate an overall score for Kuwait's future prospects. This score allows the prime minister to gauge how making changes to one variable might affect other variables and sway the overall score.

"These are systems that facilitate the interaction and feedback among human judgments, information, and software so that each can change in real time," says the report in reference to the South Korean and Kuwaiti systems.

The report further details the Millennium Project's own compilations

of global research in a survey of the futures-research activities of the Millennium Project's nodes. It also has several new studies not seen in the 2009 edition. These include a series of developments likely to significantly impact Latin America before 2030. Also, the report contains an international review of the concept of creating a Partnership for Sustainable Development.

The *2010 State of the Future* presents descriptions of both formidable challenges and exciting new technology-enhanced foresight systems that could help world leaders meet them. The report makes a compelling case for international cooperation and then displays fascinating, successful test cases in how such cooperation can work. World leaders, policy makers, and private citizens of all walks of life would find the report both impressive and enlightening.

BOOKS IN BRIEF

A Field Guide to Outer Space

The Farthest Shore: A 21st Century Guide to Space edited by Joseph N. Pelton and Angelia P. Bukley. Apogee Books. 2010. 416 pages. Paperback. \$27.95.

The Farthest Shore optimistically considers the opportunities and advantages that outer space may hold for us in the future.

Taking their cue from the International Space University's "3-I" approach (interdisciplinary, intercultural, and international), the editors have compiled essays by a number of experts in different fields from around the world, covering everything from space tourism to astrobiology to existing and emerging satellite technologies, and much in between. The volume also includes an overview of representations of space travel in art, literature, and cinema and an examination of the ways that outer space can potentially help fight climate change.

Written with a general audience in mind, *The Farthest Shore* is straight-

forward, informative, in-depth, and accessible.

How Open Collaboration Is Creating a "World Brain"

Good Faith Collaboration: The Culture of Wikipedia by Joseph Michael Reagle Jr. The MIT Press. 2010. 256 pages. \$27.95.

In *Good Faith Collaboration*, media scholar Joseph Reagle takes an ethnographic approach to understanding the collaborative "open content" community behind Wikipedia.

Wikipedia's pseudonymous and anonymous contributions are fundamentally assumed to be made in good faith, and the site is governed largely via pro-social norms, consensus building, and—most significantly—three core content policies: neutral point of view, no original research, and verifiability. The author examines these elements in depth while looking at the ways that leadership functions in this community and how anything other than consensus decision making could potentially compromise Wikipedia's openness.

Reagle also considers the online encyclopedia's origins (which date back to H. G. Wells's concept of a "world brain" and, more recently, to the free and open-source software movements) and its future potential in this compelling look at Wikipedia and wiki culture.

Why the Recession Is a Great Opportunity

The Great Reset: How New Ways of Living and Working Drive Post-Crash Prosperity by Richard Florida. HarperCollins. 2010. 225 pages. Paperback. \$26.99.

The economic recession is really an economic "reset," argues economist Richard Florida. We are seeing the demise of obsolete means of production and consumption and their replacement with new alternatives.

Florida notes that several economic crashes took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and each one was

followed by a period of sweeping innovation. In the same vein, the current global crisis could be resolved as individuals and societies transition away from outmoded and obsolete methods of commerce and consumption.

Florida analyzes the trends under way and projects a new way of life that is emerging from them. He expects the industrial economy to transition to an economy driven by ideas, creativity, and knowledge, and the financial sector to lose prominence as more investment goes toward education, health care, technology, and human capital.

The Great Reset retraces history while also projecting a hopeful course for the world's future. Economists, historians, and futurists may all find it interesting reading.

Local TV in a Globalized World

New Flows in Global TV by Albert Moran. The University of Chicago Press. 2009. 192 pages. Paperback. \$40.

This critical examination of the global television industry focuses on the ways that television programs are distributed internationally—and the ways that business and culture intersect in the international marketplace of TV programs.

Viewers' tastes and preferences tend to be specific to their localities. Traditionally, syndicated "canned" programs have been translated and re-dubbed for broadcast in other languages and cultures, but an alternative approach—program formats—allows for more successful linguistic and cultural integration into other markets. Program formats are licensed as a set of instructions and services that enable a customized version of the program to be produced elsewhere. An example is Britain's *Pop Idol* franchise, which has been replicated around the world.

Author Albert Moran, a senior lecturer in media at Australia's Griffith University, examines how and why everything from children's programs such as *Romper Room* to reality and game shows are being reformatted for diverse global audiences. □