

Thinking in trends: the rise of trend forecasting in the United States

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper examines the birth of trend forecasting in the USA and position trend forecasters and professional futurists within the wider history of marketing, market research and advertising.

Design/methodology/approach – The study is based upon archival research, interviews and close readings of primary and secondary literature.

Findings – Trend forecasters split from traditional market and opinion research in the early 1970s, as concerns about the future became paramount for businesses. At this time, entrepreneurial trend forecasters such as Faith Popcorn started firms, adopting futurological methods to make predictions about the future of culture. The field continued to grow into the 1990s as it developed or modified a host of mostly qualitative research methods, including environmental scanning, consumer ethnography and scenarios. Trend forecasting reveals the complexity of the relationship between business and “the future” and how trends aimed to predict as well as direct that future.

Originality/value – The article is among the first academic treatments of trend forecasting, drawn from original interviews and exclusively accessed archival research. It contributes to a theory and a history of the concept of a trend, which is understood here as a way to package the movement of culture as sellable. It likewise offers a unique exploration of the relationship between futurology and business.

Keywords Marketing history, Consumer society, Business history, Trends, Futurology, Trend forecasting, Futurism

Paper type Research paper

In a 1986 *New York Times* profile, columnist William Geist marveled at the predictive acumen of Faith Popcorn, CEO of a New York trend forecasting agency called BrainReserve (Geist, 1986). “Ms. Popcorn *knows* that white wine and light beer are history, things the rest of us won’t come to realize for about two years”, Geist reported:

She thinks the Duchess of York, Sarah Ferguson, may make “gritty honesty” popular. And she somehow sees the Reagans’ new Cavalier King Charles spaniel leading to designer brand dog food.

Observing that Americans generally speaking were a “trendy lot”, Geist explained how Fortune 500 companies, blindsided by the pace of social change, kept Popcorn’s telephone ringing “off the hook” as they sought BrainReserve’s advice for navigating shoppers’ whims. Yet this presented a dilemma for Popcorn, who complained of trend fatigue. “She becomes so tired of trends”, noted Geist, “that sometimes she secretly loves to go to the supermarket and see people buying cholesterol and Red Dye No. 2”.

BrainReserve began 12 years earlier, when Popcorn and her then-business partner, Stuart Pittman, left their jobs as creative directors of Smith/Greenland advertising agency to start a new company. In the mid-1970s, BrainReserve’s mission was simple, if cryptic – to “gather all the smartest people I could find to solve whatever problem was at hand”



(Popcorn, 1991, p. 12). Early on, their method was just as open-ended as their mission. A typical project began this way: “the two partners visit the client [. . .] analyze the marketing and the media and together with the client work out the ‘problem statement’”. They then recruited “at least four outside brains” who partook in a freewheeling problem-solving session. “They either tell me how to improve an idea or come up with a better one”, Popcorn noted at the time (Dougherty, 1975). As imaginative as these techniques may have been, though, most companies were uninterested. “I had this company, and it made nothing” Popcorn later relayed. “I pitched cold. People were like, ‘what are you talking about?’” (Popcorn, 2016).

How a company with an ambiguous purpose and struggling sales pitch ended up a hotly desired consultancy with its finger on the pulse of the zeitgeist provides a lesson in how the concept of “trend” evolved. The idea of a trend as a widespread social pattern dates back to the late 1800s, with two primary connotations: an explanation of movement in statistical data (such as economic figures or population) or an indication of the “general course” of habits, thoughts or actions (OED). Yet by the late 1960s, the word began to take on another meaning, one that pertained popular fancies – a connotation that coincided, I argue, with a paradigmatic shift. Trends began a transformation from simply *au courant* into currency: shorthand to identify, and extract value from, both micro and macro cultural change. The shift was reflected in and reinforced by new forms of expertise that emerged to identify and distribute trend knowledge. And trend forecasters like Popcorn embodied this expertise *par excellence*, launching an entire field entrusted to advise executives on where culture was heading.

This paper critically examines the growth of American trend forecasting between the early 1970s, when the industry established itself as distinct from advertising and market and opinion research, through the mid-1990s, when the language of trends crested in popular discourse. This timeframe intentionally maps onto the career of Faith Popcorn, a major player in this story. BrainReserve is one of the first dedicated trend forecasting agencies in the USA, and Popcorn’s bestselling 1991 book, *The Popcorn Report*, exemplified and in many ways galvanized the trend frenzy of the latter period. The emergence of trend forecasting highlights the ascendancy of trends as the *lingua franca* of cultural change, which functioned metaculturally to package the movement of culture as inherently sellable [1]. Trend forecasters participated in, and were precipitates of, the broad reimagining of the cultural landscape in terms of the market, and of all actors within it as somehow on its timeline – early adopter or laggard, on trend or out of fashion.

Situated within the progression of “trend” and trend forecasting is a story about cultural research. Forecasters had to figure out how to “read” the culture, and many of their techniques echoed, paralleled, borrowed from and led methodologies of the social sciences. They were by no means the first corporate actors to do so – psychology, for one, was quickly adopted for the purposes of advertising early in the twentieth century; the commercial utility of communication research came simultaneously with its inception; and research into social groups, frequently spearheaded by university-trained sociologists, instigated forms of market segmentation that evolved after the 1950s[2]. Yet the role of trend forecasters is noteworthy for at least a few reasons. It shows how a roster of qualitative research techniques – including ethnography, content analysis, environmental scanning, diffusion studies and scenarios – became choice business strategies at the very moment that computer-driven, quantitative techniques were growing in prominence and power. Trend forecasting is, therefore, not only a sterling example of how business represents a prolific site for the development and consumption of social science. Even more noteworthy is the reason why forecasters turned toward these methods: they offered a means to detect,

describe and shape the future, which was an increasingly important and profitable frontier of corporate activity.

Indeed, trends were indices of future momentum, and their growth must be considered as an extension and commercialization of futurology, which was also gaining ground during this period. While the desire to know, understand and control the future has a solid place in human history, and predictive impulses have been systematized, codified and thoroughly marketized since the late nineteenth century, the futurological turn of the early 1970s grew out of social scientific developments and popular tracts that enraptured a populace obsessed with, and unnerved by, the hastening speed of change. Trend forecasters rode this wave of fascination, turning to “applied futurism” (Popcorn, 2016) in their quest of forecasts that might calm anxious executives – or, in some cases, stoke those anxieties to profitable result. The work forecasters did for corporations concretized the future of culture: it was not something messy, amorphous and mysterious but instead more intelligible, navigable and marketable. In this sense, trend forecasters manufactured the future – although in unexpected ways.

The next section explores how the postwar interest in futurity began to intertwine, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with novel approaches to management, consumer research and marketing within American businesses. I will then discuss how an intensifying desire to understand and “win” the future created entrepreneurial opportunities for professional futurists, of which Faith Popcorn and her BrainReserve are an emblematic case. The conclusion will briefly propose some implications of trend forecasting and consider what “thinking in trends” has to teach about the function of future prediction.

The future of the corporation

The late 1960s and early 1970s mark a period of significant change in the USA. The era is a complex tapestry of shifts both impermanent and enduring – widespread political activism, growing environmentalism, rising post-industrialism, slowing economic growth and diminishing confidence in social, economic and political institutions of all kinds. Like other institutions, American businesses struggled to grasp the profundity of the transformations, but what heightened their consternation was the degree to which many companies previously had ignored social and cultural issues without harm. Amid such intense changes, perhaps the most transformative of all was the recognition of change itself: years of tradition, security and understanding rapidly ceding to the unmanageable, the uncontrollable and the unknown.

One person who sought to explain the new environment was Alvin Toffler, a former labor journalist for *Fortune* magazine. Although not the first to call attention to the social transformations afoot, his 1965 *Horizon* magazine article, “The Future as a Way of Life”, crystallized its far-reaching implications. He named it “future shock”: a feeling similar to the “culture shock” of “bewilderment, frustration and disorientation” that Peace Corps volunteers and other Americans traveling abroad experienced. Yet future shock afflicted inhabitants of their own country, and was even more disorienting. At least travelers “have the comforting knowledge that the culture they left behind will be there to return to”, while “[t]he victim of future shock does not” (Toffler, 1965, p. 109). Toffler spent nearly five years expanding these ideas into *Future Shock*, the comprehensive book which became a global bestseller. In it, Toffler vividly describes a society in the midst of an “abrupt collision with the future” in which “millions of ordinary, psychologically normal people [...] will find it increasingly painful to keep up with the incessant demand for change that characterizes our time” (Toffler, 1990, p. 9). Breakneck change was rattling every social foundation to its core – from the family to work, from medicine to politics. To cope, “the individual must become

infinitely more adaptable and capable than ever before” (p. 35), and social institutions needed to start immediately to support and funnel this transformation. “A challenge of such proportions demands of us a dramatically new, more deeply rational response toward change”, Toffler wrote near the book’s conclusion. “[B]y making imaginative use of change to channel change, we cannot only spare ourselves the trauma of future shock, we can reach out and humanize distant tomorrows” (p. 486-487).

Future Shock triggered deep reflection among its business readership. In the pages of *Advertising Age*, Theodore J. Van De Kamp, a marketing director, identified a “nightmare of unpredictability” that future shock had wrought, openly wondering: “Is the corporation as we know it today able to exist in the Age of Future Shock?” (Van De Kamp, 1974, p. 40). Carl Spielvogel of McCann Agency moaned that he was “constantly amazed at the number of persons in the agency business who have yet to read as basic a book on change as Alvin Toffler’s *Future Shock*, or any book,” despite that the foundations upon which their businesses had been built were suddenly shaky (Spielvogel, 1971). The chairman of the board of the Hanes Dye and Finishing ordered copies for all of the company’s top brass; at McKinsey, *Future Shock* was excerpted for its internal newsletter; Lloyd Singer, Vice President of Motorola, ranked it among “the most important works of our time (Singer, 1971) [3]”. *Future Shock*, if not required reading for the executive class, at the very least turned into a lodestar, a reference point and a provocation. “Planning will no longer be considered another management function [. . .] it will be recognized as the *way* to manage”, wrote Edward Green, a corporate planner, in a piece on the book in *Management Review*. “We can’t predict the future with accuracy, but we can’t plan for the future until we create an estimate of we will believe will happen” (Green, 1970, p. 69, emphasis original).

Green’s response, typical of his contemporaries, also highlights one of the most striking aspects of reading *Future Shock* nearly 50 years on: how closely Toffler’s pronouncements align with the way that business has come to talk about itself. Whatever challenge it offered, whatever fears it might have incited – it has all been thoroughly absorbed into the rhetoric, if not the logic, of American business. This is perhaps not surprising. Toffler, although plainly critical of many institutions and driven to effect meaningful transformation, was neither particularly anti-capitalist nor progressive. Moreover, he was well-versed in the literature of influential business thinkers of his time, like John Diebold, author of 1952’s *Automation* and champion of technological transformation, and Peter Drucker, whose *Age of Discontinuity* (1969) articulated the nascent mandate for perennial innovation. Likewise, as Walter Friedman writes in his history of economic forecasting, capitalism “is a uniquely future-oriented economic system in which people make innovations, apply for patents, watch interest rates, and in other ways ‘bet on the future’” (Friedman, 2013, p. 1); capitalism without some eye toward what lies ahead would be difficult if not impossible to fathom. But the embrace of *Future Shock* within the corporate culture cannot be fully explained by these reasons. What helped catapult Toffler’s work toward wholehearted acceptance among executives, managers, marketers, advertisers and planners was its resonance with an intellectual movement striving to not only bring the future into view but also anticipate it fully and shape it methodically. The future’s movement, fluctuation and risk were first revelations, then assets to be capitalized upon by companies newly infatuated with flexibility as well as by those who positioned themselves as uniquely able to grasp complexity and ambiguity.

Methods for managing the future broke decisively, imaginatively and mystically with their scientifically rational predecessors in the wake of the Second World War. As Williams (2016, p. 1) has argued, the postwar period birthed within strategic planning an “ostensibly secular prophecy in which the primary objective was not to foresee *the* future but rather to

schematize, in narrative form, a *plurality* of possible futures”, through a complex marriage between cybernetics and Eastern mysticism. As early as 1959, a management theorist like Stafford Beer could assert that the “exceeding complexity of management systems [...] required acknowledging the irreducible multiplicity of possible outcomes” (Williams, 2016, p. 25); in his *Horizon* piece, Toffler (1965, p. 115) noted that:

[t]he willingness to speculate freely, combined with a knowledge of scientific method and predictive techniques, is coming to be valued in precisely the place where, in the past, the greatest emphasis has been placed on conservatism and feet-on-the-ground “realism”.

As companies in the 1960s and 1970s began to focus more on competition and strategy – spurred in part by the mounting power of management consultants (Kiechel, 2010, pp. 1-9, p. 21; McKenna, 2006, p. 5, p. 147, pp. 210-211) – the status quo of earlier eras disintegrated, and managers increasingly saw the future as an unclear but necessary question.

Two methods, both developed by military strategists at the RAND Corporation, assisted corporate managers in exploring the future more easily. The first is scenario planning. In its earliest incarnation, scenario planning involved the systematic imagination of an array of possibilities for a given situation; planners would then produce narratives as a way of envisioning the ramifications of these options in detail (Bradfield *et al.*, 2005, p. 797, p. 800; Turner, 2006, p. 186). The most legendary early corporate usage of scenario planning was by Royal Dutch/Shell in the 1970s. Prior to adopting scenario planning, Shell’s forecasting techniques foresaw price stability, incrementally growing demand and little reason to suspect that any volatile changes would reshape the oil markets (Kleiner, 2008, pp. 123-124). However, thanks to the efforts of Pierre Wack and Ted Newland – both deeply interested in the work of famed RAND strategist and author Herman Kahn – Shell began to use scenario methods to conceive of potential changes to come, such as higher prices, political volatility or decreasing demand (Kleiner, 2008, pp. 142-147; Turner, 2006, p. 187). Instead of simply attending to issues that immediately pertained to their bottom line, “[c]ompanies like Shell would have to pay attention to many things that had never concerned them before” (Kleiner, 2008, p. 153). When fuzzy, ill-defined social and cultural risks became a part of the mix, profitability hinged upon assuming uncertainty rather than certainty.

In 1964, another group of RAND associates developed a second systematic method of qualitative future prediction. Known as the Delphi technique, it was a long-range forecasting method that “used a sequence of questionnaires to elicit predictions from individual experts” which were summarized and then “fed back” to the respondents in an iterative, bias-proofing process (Gordon and Helmer, 1964, p. 5). Theodore Gordon, who along with Olaf Helmer authored a seminal report on science and technology forecasting, later explained: “[w]e set about inviting people who were likely to have something to say”, including “science fiction writers and policymakers and luminaries in their field” (Gordon, 2016). Delphis grew to be wildly popular, with major corporations such as General Electric, Kaiser Aluminum and TRW, Inc. commissioning their own Delphis during the mid-to-late 1960s (Gordon, 1967; *The Futurist*, 1969; North and Pyke, 1969). Delphis were crucial in standardizing the practice of corporations seeking advice from experts far beyond their specific trade.

Corporate usage of Delphi and scenario planning showed the tremendous advantages that could come from studied future speculation. “[T]he future is our only field of power, for we can only act on the future”, wrote Bertrand de Jouvenel, noted French futurist and author of *The Art of Conjecture*, which appeared in English in 1967 (de Jouvenel, 1967, p. 5). If the future was *not* predetermined and *not* just like yesterday but instead up for grabs, it was a field of competition, negotiation and opportunity that companies neglected at their peril. It was a space in which companies had to expect the unknown and plan deliberately for it;

noted one book on long-range forecasting, “understanding of the problems arising from uncertainty helps the planner see which uncertainties or which effects of uncertainties might be reducible and which are irreducible” (Scott, 1965, p. 105). Savvy managers could use ambiguity to their advantage, seizing upon controllable elements, better preparing for multiple contingencies or acting so as to turn the future in their favor. For managers, the future increasingly became performative (Mason *et al.*, 2015): a way to manage the present both by setting desired futures in motion and rendering preparation for the future a constant business posture.

Management’s approach to the future focused much of its attention on macro-level drivers of social, cultural, political and economic change: population data, political conflicts, economic indicators, technological progress or social movements. But another important dimension of change occurred at the micro level – how individual consumers made decisions, formed allegiances and accepted or rejected newness. Marketers took the lead on making sense of these issues, drawing less from military planners than from communication research, sociology and social psychology. Much like their colleagues in management, they would come to find insecurity, mobility and rebellion acceptable rather than regrettable, and animating rather than worrying.

America’s, the influential two-part study issued by Opinion Research Corporation in 1959, exemplified how marketers began to make such realizations (Opinion Research Corporation, 1959a, 1959b). The report warned that market research had gotten it backward: “Habitually, our observations focus on convenient categories – sex, income, education, etc. – that may obscure rather than illuminate the process of change”. Because “consumer behavior that determines sales trends, industry performance, national indices – and not vice versa” (April 1959a, p. 1), what was needed was a theory of consumer change, which the report called the “Mobility Theory of Market Prediction”. Based on the idea that “there a group of people whose behavior patterns will be followed later on by the mass” (July 1959b, p. 2), the report identified “high mobiles” as those inclined toward change across a range of choices, behaviors and identities. These consumers, who were “early adopters” and “leaders” could “act as a sensitive barometer of upcoming change in American values” as well as “consolidate old trends and start new ones in our values, in styles and tastes, and ultimately in product preference” (April 1959a; July 1959b, p. 53). The advice was clear: marketing should concentrate the most effort not on particular demographics *per se* but on these trendsetting change agents.

At the same time that marketing was becoming more focused on consumer dynamism, the school of “marketing management” had prioritized marketing as central to all levels of business decision-making (Shaw and Jones, 2005, p. 256). In an interview in *Nation’s Business* in 1963, Malcolm McNair (1963, p. 81), Harvard Business School professor and marketing pioneer, explained that:

There is the older point of view on marketing, which is that it is essentially a job of selling, the job of the sales manager and all the activities that relate to it. That is a somewhat limited point of view. Today most of us in marketing think of it as a concept that envelops all of management. All business has to be market-oriented. Essentially, marketing comes before production. That might sound paradoxical but unless you can sell merchandise there is no point in producing it.

With marketing dictating production, research about consumers took on new dimensions. Market segmentation and motivation research were already well-established; to augment them, marketers of the mid-to-late 1960s began to look more intently at buyer behavior, as well re-envision how segments might be comprised (Sheth, 1967; Yankelovich, 1964). For example, in 1966, McNair (1966) pressed retailers to assume that their buyers were:

Youthful in mind and spirit, increasingly affluent, increasingly au courant of the culture in which they live, increasingly sophisticated, increasingly concerned with self-expression, and increasingly concerned with the development of individual good taste.

The movement toward a more refined understanding of consumers was further buoyed by the rise of psychographics, the “development of psychological profiles of consumers and psychologically-based measures of life styles”, which *Advertising Age* named one of the most important advances of 1968 (Wells, 1974, p. 5, p. 15). Around the same time, marginalized groups, such as African-Americans, senior citizens and women came to the forefront of marketers’ thinking – especially as these groups began to seek out empowerment within the marketplace, and a “credibility gap” increasingly separated corporations from their customers (Cohen, 2003, pp. 315-331; Binkley, 2007, p. 89). All of this was a sea change from earlier practices of “consumer engineering” and planned obsolescence, in which top-down, superfluous updates to a product’s shape or color reckoned to dupe consumers to buy (Cohen, 2003, pp. 294-296). Instead, new fashions could emerge from anywhere – or as one observer put it, “[n]ew social concepts no longer percolate down – they percolate up” (Weiss, 1971, p. 39).

Diffusion research readily supplied a way to comprehend the organic origins and granular transfer of tastes. While diffusion can be traced back to the early 1900s, as both social psychologists and anthropologists sought to understand how ideas spread across social systems, a noteworthy revival in diffusion studies took place in the 1950s within communication and sociology, bleeding into as well as drawing from the overlapping territories of opinion research and marketing (Katz *et al.*, 1963, pp. 238-239). Newer studies corresponded with sociological interest in popular culture, fads and fashions, which were becoming more legitimate areas of study during the same period (Krugman and Hartley, 1960, p. 622). Diffusion was also closely related to prominent scholarship about opinion leadership, such as Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld’s 1955 *Personal Influence*, which underscored “the importance of social pressures in motivating people to expose themselves and be receptive to the influence of communications” (Katz and Lazarsfeld’s, 1955, p. 27).

But it was Everett Rogers’s *Diffusion of Innovations*, published in 1962, that deserves credit for amplifying these new ways of thinking about consumer behavior and proclivities; to this day, the taxonomy it presented remains a dominant way for classifying consumers. Borrowing from the schema put forward in *Personal Influence*, as well as *America’s Tastemakers* and rural sociology, Rogers hypothesized that different groups of people would be primed to ideas at different times; these were “innovators”, “early adopters”, “early majority”, “late majority” and “laggards” (Rogers, 1962, p. 19). While this system somewhat coincided with standard demographic categories such as age and social status, its advantage for marketers was the degree to which it conceived of consumers in an ordinal fashion, as leaders and followers, who could take to different novelties at different times. A temporal classification of consumers thus made it possible to “forecast” their behavior. In theory, this meant that product acceptance could be mapped, like weather, as it moved across a population[4]. Chester Wasson, marketing professor and consultant, noted as much in the *Journal of Marketing* in 1968: “[n]ot only with fashion, but with product acceptance in general far more is predictable than is generally thought”, he wrote (Wasson, 1968, 43). In effect, theorizing consumption as waves of adoption would give rise to a new, much more powerful form of consumer engineering that exploited social behavior. And with certain consumers as bellwethers of others’ imminent behavior, the future existed not intangibly “out there”, but in flesh.

The act of differentiating consumers spatially and temporally took hold strongly in the world of fashion, where forecasting began to take off in the 1960s. Of course, fashion was the

ultimate erratic commodity; as Harold Blumer noted in 1969, “its touch is not light [. . .] It sets sanctions of what is to be done, it is conspicuously indifferent to criticism, it demands adherence, and it bypasses as oddities and misfits those who fail to abide by it” (Blumer, 1969, p. 276). Over the course of the twentieth century, seasonable variation in color, cut and fabric was the norm, especially in women’s apparel, and textile manufacturers had worked together since the 1910s to determine, for instance, what hues would come to market when (Blaszczyk, 2012; Brannon, 2010). But it was not until the 1960s that fashion became a globally competitive business where designers tried to both get ahead of other designers and mine youth and the street for looks. Pioneers in the fashion forecasting industry, such as Ohio-born, London-based David Wolfe, designated themselves as hunters for these looks and consumers, whether on the streets of Chelsea or the runways of Paris, which they then ferried back to middle American retailers (Wolfe, 2016).

The forecasting of bodies, values and styles – whether in fashion or food, automobiles or appliances – would put “the innovator” at center stage. Innovators, as initiators of new ideas, looks and values, very quickly became cherished consumers – not only valuable targets for a sales pitch but also a resource to be discovered, studied and followed by everyone, including corporations. Early adopters were likewise coveted; although they did not create change, their leading-edge acceptance made them central to understanding how the mass market might behave. But to find these subgroups and decipher their wisdom was no easy task. The period’s climate of social rebellion, married to longstanding fascination with the hip cool of the Other, meant that many changes that would come to affect the mainstream – long defined as white, middle-class, suburban, straight-laced and heterosexual – got their start among places and people that companies had long ignored or avoided, such as urban ghettos, homosexual discos or punk enclaves. In this way and others, the marking of certain people as “ahead” or “behind” the curve proved both deeply political and often predatory; it likewise depended a level of cultural understanding beyond one’s business that many simply did not have time for. Management consulting, for all its know-how, was hardly up to this task. What was needed instead were professionals willing to identify pockets of trailblazing culture, no matter how off the beaten path they were and report back from the trenches. What was needed were translators, who would explain micro-level action in terms of collective behavior, and use it to bear both good and bad news. And such wisdom would be irresistible if it could be cast as the solution to a future that everyone agreed was a distressing problem.

Popcorn reports

Before she was Faith Popcorn, she was Faith Plotkin, the Manhattan-born daughter of Jewish attorneys. Born in 1947, Popcorn attended New York University, although she “didn’t like school” and “barely” managed to complete her degree (“I spent most of my college years [. . .] in bars with my professors” she later recalled) (Popcorn and Siroto, 2016). After graduating in the late 1960s, she began her career in advertising; by the early 1970s, she was vice president and creative director at Smith/Greenland, a small yet lucrative New York advertising agency known for its gutsy and off-kilter campaigns (Dougherty, 1970; Fox, 2011). Popcorn – who, legend has it, assumed the alias after a boss had repeated difficulties recalling her given name – recalls a “romantic and adventurous” workplace where hardworking creative women could escape, at least moderately, from the industry’s rampant sexism. “We worked until 11 o’clock every night, and we worked every single weekend”, she notes. “And we came up with really brilliant stuff” (Popcorn, 2016).

Nonetheless, Popcorn became “disillusioned” with advertising and the cookie cutter approach to selling even renegade agencies like hers could produce (Popcorn and Siroto, 2016).

Her entrance into the advertising profession coincides with the Creative Revolution, when many agencies shed their conformist image and embarked on a radical re-envisioning of what advertising was and how it was done. As William Tyler, Director of Creative Services at Benton and Bowles, explained in *Advertising Age*, “Some call it creative freedom. Others, creative permissiveness. Still others, creative anarchy. Whichever, it is the closest thing to a revolution the ad business has experienced” (Tyler, 1969, p. 41). Following the lead of Bill Bernbach, whose Doyle Dane Bernbach generated some of the era’s most memorable ads, agencies began to play down advertising’s scientific credentials and unleash the imaginations of their creative departments. Those employees, in turn, delivered a different kind of advertising: more knowing, more visually daring and more in line with countercultural and socially critical themes. When they did not find their ideas sufficiently appreciated by their bosses, they often left to start their own firms (Frank, 1998, p. 49, pp. 53-61, pp. 96-97).

When Popcorn and Stuart Pittman struck out on their own in 1974, then, they were part of the exodus of creatives whose new companies “expanded the boundaries of advertising, pioneered a thousand new techniques and formulas, and opened paths that their larger competitors would soon follow” (Frank, 1998, p. 97). As noted previously, companies felt less confidence in the marketplace as consumer desires shifted and trust in many institutions quaked. The change surging through the advertising profession transcended improved or hipper tactics for selling; it birthed entirely new methods that reimagined the tenor and purpose of advertising. As they had among their marketing colleagues, these practices involved absorbing, apprehending and getting out ahead of culture, as well as finding ways to understand and exploit uncertainty.

In a letter dated May 8, 1975, Popcorn and Pittman pitched their new company as an antidote to market malaise. “These are unusual times for many companies”, they wrote in a letter to R.A. Pittman, Vice President of Marketing at Brown and Williamson Corporation. “The conventional methods of motivating the consumer most often don’t work” (Popcorn and Pittman, 1975). They continued:

To meet this unprecedented problem we have come up with an unprecedented solution. The formation of BrainReserve: a task force of seven of the most innovative and respected creative talents in America. For the first time these people have been brought together, to work together, on a single problem: a combination unavailable at any advertising agency, boutique or on a freelance basis [. . .] Having no preconceptions to start with, our solutions are wide-ranging and nonconformist.

As the name BrainReserve suggests, Popcorn and Pittman’s team solved problems with brain power, harnessing the ideas of people who were not constrained by the norms or functions of a traditional agency. The original team of reservists included a number of “advertising stars”, (Popcorn, 2016), including Shirley Polykoff, the mind behind Clairol’s famous “Does She or Doesn’t She?” advertising campaign of the 1950s and Ornofrio “Patch” Paccione, a top ad executive and photographer who had learned the business from Paul Rand. At BrainReserve meetings, participants used the “applied art” of creative brainstorming that had popularized after the 1953 publication of Alex Osborn’s *Applied Imagination* (Osborn, 1953). These group problem-solving sessions were an early hallmark of a particular brand of creativity, in which the market provides the framework for perceiving the creative act as such (Brouillette, 2009).

In addition to their creative “brain trust”, BrainReserve combed through magazines, newspapers and other venues to familiarize themselves with their client, the industry and the pertinent cultural developments. They also surveyed stakeholders, such as customers and salespeople, so they might present a complete picture of the company and its issues (Popcorn and Pittman, 1975). It was a process that blended advertising, marketing and

management consulting, resulting in not just ideas for advertising campaigns but also marketing opportunities and product extensions. An example: for Consolidated Cigar, one of the company's first clients, BrainReserve proposed a cigar for women and a fruity cigar aimed at marijuana smokers (Dougherty, 1976).

BrainReserve's techniques evolved as the company matured. Initially in the business of generating "super ideas to make consumers part with their dollars in the poor economy", Popcorn and Pittman soon realized that BrainReserve was "in a position to help companies which, because of long-range marketing plans, are caught by rapid social changes" (Dougherty, 1976). Their style of forecasting took the temperature of cultural life and they explained it to clients in ways they could understand and hopefully profit from. With Campbell's Soup, another early client, BrainReserve called attention to the rise of fresh foods, pressing the canned soup king to prepare for revised consumer expectations (Popcorn and Siroto, 2016). In efforts such as this, BrainReserve was selling more than their awareness of change. Central to their success was that cultural change itself could be a commodity, extracted to benefit corporations, but also themselves.

Other companies were also beginning to marketize cultural change. Independent futurist groups date back to the early 1960s, when a few RAND strategists splintered off to start organizations with broader scopes than military planning. Herman Kahn, for instance, founded the Hudson Institute in 1961, where he and his research staff worked with companies including Xerox, Boeing, Coca-Cola, Union Carbide and Time Inc. (Hudson Institute Report, 1969/1970, p. 1, pp. 41-46, 1970, pp. 41-44). Olaf Helmer and Theodore Gordon were among those who joined Frank P. Davidson to create the Institute of the Future in 1968; amongst their objectives was to "adapt engineering and operations research techniques to the social sciences" as well as to produce an annual "Future State of the Union" report (Bradfield *et al.*, 2005, p. 799; *The Futurist*, 1968, pp. 65-66). Such groups were not merely the offspring of RAND alumni. Two year earlier, The World Future Society, helmed by Edward Cornish, set up shop in Washington, D.C.; within a year, they had published the first issue of *The Futurist* magazine, which became an important public sphere for self-identified futurists. Universities also became centers for futures research. An example is the longstanding Stanford Research Institute which, by the early 1970s was consulting industries far beyond their original clientele of military and oil mining, including government, scientific bodies and corporations of many varieties (Bradfield *et al.*, 2005, p. 799; Turner, 2006, p. 184-5).

While a number of these groups profited from their forecasts, it was not until the 1970s that futuristic forecasting boomed, making futurist a bona fide job category. Gordon (1971), who departed the Institute of the Future in 1971 to form The Futures Group, a management consulting firm, quipped eliminate extraneous: "It's not exactly a household word, but for all I know there may already be an SIC classification". He continued:

How would it read? "Futurist: one professionally concerned with the future, describing, usually through systematic methods, what might be, not singly but in consistent and probabilistic sets". As a breed, futurists are thus non-determinists, anti-nihilists, rationalists. They are scattered in government and industry planning groups; in universities which are teaching about change, how to understand it and bring it about; in research institutions, devising methods and applying them to tough problems of social policy; or in private consulting groups, trying to bridge the gap between theory and reality, trying to make the tools work in pragmatic, real-time applications involving immediate decisions (p. 322).

One "real-time application" for futurist work took place within the life insurance industry, where Edith "Edie" Weiner began her career. A 20-year-old college graduate in 1969, Weiner was hired at the Institute of Life Insurance under Harold Edrich, a sociologist who ran the

Institute's social research team. At the time, Edrich's group was working on an instrument to monitor changing values and attitudes, which they called MAP (Monitoring Attitudes Program). Elsewhere in the company, Arnold Brown proposed the creation of a "mechanism" for tracking social change, which resulted in what came to be known as the Trend Analysis Program (TAP). TAP produced periodic reports that encapsulated the overhaul of contemporary society ([TAP Reports]). As noted in their first report, from June 1971, TAP:

Is based on the concept that at least some of the changes in society result from changes in ideas and that publications are the means whereby ideas circulate through society. Regularly and systematically monitoring publications can serve to identify ideas with potential impact on our business and to track their progress or diffusion through society. (p. 3)

Weiner soon came to the attention of Brown and began contributing to the TAP reports; when Brown was promoted to Vice President in 1972, Weiner took over running the program. For the next five years, she coordinated dozens of volunteer readers, who collectively studied more than 70 publications for indications of social, economic, technological or political change. Weiner, Edrich and Brown left the Institute in 1977 and founded their own eponymous consultancy. There, they began to produce trend reports for clients beyond insurers, including J. Walter Thompson, Hoffman LaRoche, SRI International and *Esquire* magazine, using a technique they called environmental or "strategic" scanning. As Weiner and Brown later explained in their book, *Supermanaging*, environmental scanning was "a new kind of radar to systematically scan the world and signal the new, the unexpected, the major, and the minor" (Brown and Weiner, 1984, p. 7). "A lot of what was changing was pattern recognition, and that had to be intuitive", Weiner later explained. For Weiner, no amount of quantitative data or computer modelling could substitute for a highly developed "curatorial" sense groomed to pick up on signals of change (Weiner, 2016).

Weiner's work exemplifies the centrality of trends to the work of professional futurism. A somewhat mocking *Saturday Review* piece on "the rise of the predicting profession" did sympathize with futurists with regards to the sheer impossibility of their object of study: "All they can do [. . .] is to study the way trends progress and interact, and speculate about events that may change the course of those trends" (p. 28). Trends, as it turned out, were even more useful than that. They were the ideal conceptual tool for integrating high-level societal understanding with low-level bursts of cultural populism; they bundled the future and made good business. As one business school guide stated, during the 1970s, there were a:

Growing number of research and consulting firms offering a variety of services that monitor the environment—identifying changing trends and opportunities as well as potential problems of importance to companies.

The guide advised that despite their cost, these trend services "are still of great value to those corporations that must anticipate these changes and developing trends" (Daniells, 1980, p. 20).

Most futurist agencies promoted themselves as trend specialists. The Futures Group, Gordon's firm, developed several trend products: PROSPECT, a service that monitored a hundred consumer and pharmaceutical trends; FUTURSCAN, a self-service system that allowed companies to customize their scans; and Trend Impact Analysis, a method that combined historical data and trend extrapolation with expert judgment to account for the possibility of "unprecedented future events" (Daniells, 1980, p. 20-21; Bradfield *et al.*, 2005, p. 801). Future Option Room, run by Jerry Glen, Scott Dankman and Roy Mason, began in

the early 1970s to “synthesize information from a variety of fields into condensed formats to give you the best future options”, focusing on “how changing social values and trends could affect your growth” (Future Options Room, 2017). High-profile pollsters, aware of the techniques being developed by futurists, also got into the sale of trends. Yankelovich, Skelly and White – helmed by renowned pollsters Daniel Yankelovich and Florence Skelly – worked on a number of trend products, including Corporate Priorities, Monitor and YouthMonitor (Weiner, 2016; Daniells, 1980, p. 20-21). Even the *New York Times* made a foray into this field. Subscribers to its Information Bank would have access to an “online service that permits daily tracking of information”, accessing more than 1,000 articles that could “a dependable source of facts, trends, ideas” (The New York Times, 1974).

The *New York Times* example shows the increasing entanglement of futurology and information filtering and management. Information services made sense as futurological devices in light of information surplus, where news of threats or opportunities might flare up from anywhere. As the average businessperson could not keep tabs on every relevant news source (and especially when print news could be difficult to access), futurists emerged to fill a much-needed void: they found and curated information; they subscribed and read for you. While the *New York Times* Information Bank was more than futurological, several similar services with an emphatically futurist bent cropped up in the 1970s, including Changes, a daily news digest distributed by a Canadian company called ORBA, and Futuremics, an information service that published Future Abstracts. For \$110 per year, a Future Abstracts subscriber in 1975 would receive “the latest information about the future literally at your fingertips”, on 48 index cards of 5 × 8 dimensions per month, filled with reports on “films, tapes, games, and journals; abstracts of university theses and unpublished papers; graphs, statistical data, trend projections, and bibliographies” (Futuremics, Inc., 1975).

Information was thus a critical aspect of trend forecasting. Acting much like Bourdieu’s “cultural businessman” who “is at one and the same time the person who exploits the labour of the ‘creator’ by trading in the ‘sacred’ and the person who, by putting it on the market, by exhibiting, publishing, or staging it, consecrates a product which he has ‘discovered’ and which would otherwise remain a mere natural resource” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 76), forecasters’ keen understanding of cultural happenings allowed them to define what was truly remarkable and what was mere noise, defining patterns and themes that, though visible, might otherwise go unnoticed. Their consecrative power oversaw not just cultural production or practice but also, crucially, reporting and criticism. The trend forecaster became, in effect, a metacultural intermediary, discovering and defining the “culture that is about culture” so that her work “focuses attention on the cultural thing, helps to make it an object of interest and, hence, facilitates its circulation” (Urban, 2001, p. 4).

Of all the trend forecasters, perhaps none epitomized metacultural intermediation as well as John Naisbitt. Born in 1929, Naisbitt was the president of the Naisbitt Group, a service that spotted trends for corporations. A 1982 *Wall Street Journal* profile called him a “professional trend-watcher” who made big money forecasting cultural shifts:

“Just as economists have crafted a profitable industry forecasting interest rates and the gross national product, Mr. Naisbitt and others have made businesses of predicting broad social, economic and political developments,” the reporter noted.

“Their clients seem to see in the trend-watcher’s service an orderly way of keeping abreast of events that they don’t control but with which they must come to grips if they are to stay in business” (Abrams, 1982).

That same year, Naisbitt collected his observations in *Megatrends*, a book which by 1985 had sold more than six million copies and which continues to shape the language of

forecasting (Willard and Lawler, 1985). Defining megatrends as “broad outlines that will define the new society”, Naisbitt identified ten transformations that his group had excavated over their years of newspaper “content analysis” (Naisbitt, 1982, p. 2, pp. 3-5). Megatrends were not fly-by-night fads, but consequential, unavoidable shifts that would set society on a new course. The concept of megatrends has since become a standard trope within the trend forecaster’s arsenal; while many companies also discuss smaller, faster moving trends, most identify parent trends in which microtrends are nested.

At BrainReserve, metacultural intermediation came in three guises. The first was its development of consumer research reports, first produced in 1980. “Americans are not really the connoisseurs of wine they appear to be”, began a splashy *New York Times* feature on the report entitled “Inside Consumers’ Minds”:

Warned of the perils of salt, Americans miss it badly and crave well-spiced food. People are not wildly enthusiastic about the new small cars. They are not so interested in open marriage or divorce as they used to be. And youth, as an American cult, is out (Barmash, 1980).

The findings alone already stood out in a context where communal marriage was still a buzzword and Betty Crocker ruled American kitchens with her wholesome, unassuming cookbooks. BrainReserve’s proclamations not only defied convention but also recommended that “sweeping changes in marketing and product innovation” answer them (Barmash, 1980). “Nobody ever believed me, ever, and still to this day they don’t believe it”, Popcorn has since remarked (Popcorn, 2016). But as BrainReserve became as a source for pithy, bold and prescient cultural prediction, Popcorn’s star continued to rise, especially after Pittman exited the company in 1984. “[A]long with the wind, time and tide, the tectonic plates, the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the Byzantine tax code, Faith Popcorn had been irresistibly shaping our life”, noted Wiliam McKibben in *The New Yorker’s* Talk of the Town in 1986:

Is Faith Popcorn the ur of our era? Is she the oversoul incarnate? And, if so, is she nice? We can report that she is as nice as she is omniscient, and that is almost totally (McKibben, 1986, p. 22).

Oversoul incarnate was exaggerating things, but McKibben’s joke spoke to the second role which BrainReserve, and specifically Popcorn, performed – as a guru of trends who doled out burnished nuggets of cultural interpretation. Variably called the “Nostradamus of Marketing”, the “Trend Oracle” and other hyperbolic titles through much of the 1980s and early 1990s, Popcorn was a favorite in publications like the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, the *Wall Street Journal* and *Fortune*; in 1987, one reporter went so far as to call her “one of the most interviewed women on the planet” (Miller, 1987). “I was always interesting to the press, maybe it was my name or something”, Popcorn later reflected. When journalists telephoned, “the only thing [. . .] that I could ever talk about was what was going to happen” (Popcorn, 2016) – and the more outlandish the quote, the better.

Once identified as an omniscient source for information (and fandangle), Popcorn and BrainReserve could dole out another metacultural intervention: peddling BrainReserve’s unique take on trends. A 1985 client report exploring the market for premium dog food explained that such a product could harness two significant social currents: the country’s drift toward more traditional products (in line with growing social conservatism) and consumers’ newfound penchant for premium goods. Another report, for a fast food client in 1987, explained how urgent it was to cater to buyers inclined toward convenience, small indulgences and variety (Popcorn, 1985; Popcorn, 1987). BrainReserve’s work was thus doubly trend-oriented: labelling trends, but also marketing the trends they identified

to their clients, whose adherence to them became affirmation of BrainReserve's work. Over the years, Popcorn and her team refined their own list of "megatrends", which continued to serve as a prism to adjudicate their clients' products and services. BrainReserve's trends were a particular take on the world, which did not vary from client to client; instead, clients conformed to the trends as Popcorn saw them.

In 1991, Popcorn published *The Popcorn Report: Faith Popcorn on the Future of your Company, your World, your Life*. Collecting her observations over the years, the book presents scenarios for the future, an outline of ten key trends, and advice on how to keep one's business looking ahead. "Trends are predictive because they start small, then gather momentum", Popcorn wrote (Popcorn, 1991, p. 25). "To make your product or business on-trend, you'll need to understand how the trends work together to define the future". Each of the ten trends occupies its own chapter, and is festooned with a crackerjack name such as "Cashing Out", "Down-Aging" or "99 Lives". The chapters include examples of real brands that responded (or didn't) to the trends, as well as make-believe products that illustrate a trend's applicability. For instance, regarding the "Fantasy Adventure" trend ["vicarious escape through consumption" (p. 34)], Popcorn rattles off ways that companies might adapt:

What about the return of Scent-a-Rama movies, with scents pumped into the theater? Or Escapist Rooms, where scenes and sounds are projected on the wall; for instance, a trip to Kenya or Paris. A California company is actually proposing that in the future tourists should come to theaters built at the entryways of America's great national parks and view a film on a giant wraparound screen – without ever stepping foot in the parks themselves. Benefits: No more tiring walks, no more tour buses infringing on nature. (p. 37)

In addition to its list of trends, *The Popcorn Report* explained BrainReserve's other cleverly named forecasting tools and products. TrendView, for instance, was a seminar for "20 to 1,500 people" that would educate attendees on what the future portended. TalentBank consisted of on-call experts from different professions ("more than two thousand") whom BrainReserve reached out to for insight or brought together for ideation sessions. What they called "brailling the culture" was a hybrid of nonstop ethnography and environmental scanning – reading, listening to and watching media, but also surveying anyone and everyone regarding their views about culture. TrendTrek, another quasi-ethnographic tool, involved "a field trip to a cutting-edge location that stimulates fresh thinking about new products and services". Additional "proprietary" methodologies included particular approaches to critical thinking, market research and expert consultation (Popcorn, 1991, p. 100, p. 13, p. 22, pp. 190-193, p. 197).

The book was a hit, for a time catapulting Popcorn from niche celebrity to household name. Yet recognition came at a cost. To this day, Popcorn's name provokes either qualification or defense among her peers and competitors, signaling the level of controversy that continues to surround her and her work. Even during the height of her fame – and likely because of it – Popcorn received frequent ridicule. "Is Faith Popcorn for real?" wondered one story from *The Futurist* magazine, noting that her "unforgettable" name detracted from her credibility ("Trend Spotting", p. 45). Others were even less kind. In a scathing exposé in the *New Republic*, Ruth Shalit criticized Popcorn, questioned her methods and shamed the companies that shelled out millions for her advisement. "The familiar rap on Faith Popcorn is that she is an old-fashioned scam artist, hoodwinking corporations and journalists with elegant spin on the glaringly obvious" wrote Shalit. "The scarier truth may be that she fills a genuine spiritual gap in corporate America" – a sense of worth for executives akin to "the economics of meaning" (Shalit, 1994, p. 23).

Conclusion

Though intended as a stinging rebuke, Shalit's words crystallized a truth; we no longer question that the soul of corporate America needs perpetual saving. While Popcorn's gospel may not have been the Holy Grail, it was part of a far-reaching development to orient businesses to the hollowness of their cultural understanding and the necessity of facing the momentums that threatened their demise. Trend forecasters, whether situated as market consultants or freelance futurists, determined not so much to foretell the future as to make sense of the torrent of cultural life as it unfolded. Theirs *was* an economics of meaning, drawn from a medley of homegrown and borrowed strategies for comprehending the world, and sold to people convinced that the future had become far too important to be left to chance.

In the end, asking whether Popcorn is some kind of prophet or simply a profiteer is not the most interesting question. Far more interesting is what her and her peers' successes say about the role and influence of cultural prediction. During the 1970s, trend forecasting helped turn a menacing future into an opportunistic one first by breaking down the barriers between corporations and the cultures in which they existed, and second by offering the trend as a window through which to see the future of that culture prematurely. Two decades later, *Newsweek* would count trend forecasting among the decade's hottest vocations, even suggesting that it had become *too* popular and was thus due for a retrenchment (Tanaka, 1998). In the intervening period, relentless volatility had not only become normalized in American life, but had become a basic element of business operations. Forecasting the future purported to quell this instability, but actually accentuated it, in part by bracketing it, naming it, and recursively pumping it back into the culture.

It is a state of affairs that should sound familiar to us today, as trends course at warp speed through our social media platforms and evermore sophisticated analytics aim to interpret their signals. Early trend forecasters presaged this development as they digested and deciphered information flows, conjured significance out of signs and made confident recommendations about what companies should do tomorrow. Accuracy and inaccuracy are thus the wrong gauges to use when considering trend forecasters' futurism. In parsing culture into trends assumed to carry the world forward, trend forecasters neither predicted the future nor concocted it. Instead, they brought the future into being.

Notes

1. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argue that flexibility and change became key features of the capitalist firm between the 1960s and the 1990s, as companies learned to become dynamic in the face of both internal and external frictions. See pp. 71-75, 217-224.
2. Historians of marketing and consumer culture have indicated how the social sciences grew up alongside applied research that frequently adopted their methods for business purposes. For more, see Schwarzkopf, 2016, pp. 63-73; Arvidsson, 2004, pp. 460-465; Cohen, 2003, pp. 295-301.
3. Toffler received a number of letters about the impact of *Future Shock* upon its publication; this is a sampling.
4. In 1969, Frank M. Bass's "A New Product Growth for Model Consumer Durables" in the journal *Management Science* helped to build an interest in diffusion within the field of marketing science, the more quantitative manifestation of marketing study. Bass's work drew from Rogers as well as Katz and Lazarsfeld to quantitatively model the diffusion process (Muller, 2014, p. 77; Bass, 1969).

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