CASHING IN ON TOMORROW

A generation after the Tofflers’ *Future Shock*, professional prognosticators see nothing without a future. It was Herman Kahn, a graduate of the Rand Institute, the Urthink tank, who gave the nascent profession credibility with such groundbreaking books as *Thinking About the Unthinkable* (1961), which used sound scientific principles to predict the great specificity of the likely effects of a thermonuclear war.

But it was the Tofflers who brought futurism to the masses. *Future Shock* made the new profession cool. The book and its best-selling sequels, *The Third Wave* (1984) and *Power Shift* (1990), examined not just tomorrow but today, not just one industry but all mankind, making the paradigm-shattering argument that what was really changing society was the radical acceleration of change itself. Future shock, the Tofflers said, is what happens when change occurs faster than people’s ability to adapt to it. The book resonated for the 1960s counterculture, and in some ways it echoes even louder in the digital era. “People today,” says Alvin Toffler, “are scared silly.”

That’s the great thing about pondering the future these days: there seems to be so much more of it. Between the computer revolution and the end of the cold war, between the birth pangs of the international economy and the death throes of the traditional nuclear family, the demand for solid, scientifically based forecasting is greater than ever. Hard numbers are difficult to come by since so much “futurist” work goes on under the guise of economic forecasting or strategic analysis, but corporate America clearly has the religion. The generation of strategic planners who came of age in the 1960s and 70s has planted its forward-
looking credo so firmly in U.S. boardrooms that it permeates the corporate hierarchy. "People who used to have purely planning titles have been incorporated into other roles," says Sharon Bennett, executive director of the Strategic Leadership Forum, an industry association. If you're in management at a modern company and you don't spend at least part of your day thinking like a futurist, you probably aren't doing your job.

The independents are flourishing too. "Ten years ago, we had trouble getting clients interested in the future five years out," says Joe Coates, president of the Washington-based consulting firm Coates and Jarratt. "Now we have 50 clients who are interested in the future 10 years or more out."

The first thing Coates does is challenge a government agency's or corporation's assumptions about its future. His modus operandi, in essence, is to gather together a company's top executives and start playing with their minds. "If you can get somebody to say something they really believe about the year 2010, it's like magic," he says. "Instantly you get everyone around the table asking two key questions: How do I know I'm right, and what are the consequences if I'm wrong?"

The oft-quoted Saffo, who in his decade with the nonprofit Institute for the Future has consulted for everyone from the U.S. Defense Department to a Swedish online service, prefers to distinguish between "visionaries" like Negroponte—"people who have a vision of what the future should be and are trying to make it happen"—and workaday "forecasters" like himself. "My job is to help our clients ex-
pand their perceived range of possibilities.” Saffo says. Of course, in that capacity, he acknowledges, “you can affect outcomes.”

Sometimes, however, it’s hard to separate the cause from the effect. “Futurism isn’t prediction anymore,” says Rushkoff. “It’s state-of-the-art propaganda. It’s future creation.” As he sees the process, two of the futurists’ most potent tools are terror and exclusivity. “They put their clients in a state of fear and then explain that they hold the secret knowledge that can save them,” says Rushkoff, whose own shrewd brand of high-tech utopianism earns the 34-year-old New Yorker six-figure book advances and up to $7,500 an hour strategizing for the likes of the Sony Corp., Telecommunications Inc. and Interval Research.

Nobody propagandizes for the future more enthusiastically these days than Wired magazine, the four-year-old glossy compendium of new-media prognostication and high-tech fetishism. Even as it was loudly fueling the public frenzy for new-media stocks and entrepreneurs, however, Wired was quietly affiliated with a Bay Area outfit called the Global Business Network, which garners annual revenues of some $6 million writing scenarios of the digital future for corporate clients. The ties between the two institutions run deep, and later this month Wired Ventures Ltd.—several of whose chief stockholders are GBN partners—plans a public stock offering. If all goes well, Wired and GBN insiders stand to be handsomely enriched by the very high-tech fever they’ve helped spark. “We have business ties, intellectual ties and friendship ties,” says GBN founder Peter Schwartz of his friends at Wired. “Now I hope we’ll cash in.”

The Tofflers, who made this market in the first place, hope to cash in as well. To that end, FutureNet is talking with cable and broadcast channels and several FORTUNE 20-size companies about financial backing and developmental partnerships. The Tofflers have also recruited as executive partners TV producer Al Burton (Charles in Charge) and the tech-savvy film producer and entrepreneur Jeff Apple (In the Line of Fire). The tone of FutureNet’s offerings, Toffler says, will be “not just for the digerati and not heavy. After all,” he laughs, “it’s television.”

Twenty-five years ago, the Tofflers wrote in Future Shock that “a well-oiled machine for the creation and diffusion of facts is now an entrenched part of the modern economy.” A generation after their first great sermon, the high priest and priestess of futurism may finally get to practice what they’ve been preaching.

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**The Past, Imperfect**

A ccurately predicting the future is not an easy thing to do, as anyone who tries it quickly learns. History is filled with bold forecasts that didn't quite pan out. Herewith a few examples gleaned from collections on the World Wide Web:

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"This 'telephone' has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us."
-WESTERN UNION internal memo, 1876

"Heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible."
-LORD KELVIN, president, Royal Society, 1895

"Everything that can be invented has been invented."
-CHARLES H. DUELL, commissioner, U.S. Office of Patents, 1899

"Airplanes are interesting toys but of no military value."
-MARSHAL FERDINAND FOCH, professor of strategy, Ecole Superieure de Guerre

"Professor Goddard does not know the relation between action and reaction and the need to have something better than a vacuum against which to react. He seems to lack the basic knowledge lauded out daily in high schools."
—NEW YORK TIMES editorial about Robert Goddard's revolutionary rocket work, 1921

"The wireless music box has no imaginable commercial value. Who would pay for a message sent to nobody in particular?"
—DAVID SARNOFF'S associates, in response to his urgings for investment in the radio in the 1920s

"Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?"
—HARRY M. WARNER, Warner Bros., 1927

"I think there is a world market for maybe five computers."
—THOMAS WATSON, chairman of IBM, 1943

"There is no reason for any individuals to have a computer in their home."
—KEN OLSEN, president, chairman and founder of Digital Equipment Corp., 1977
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