Trend Analysis vs Emerging Issues Analysis

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Trend analysis is the most common formal method anyone attempting to look at the future uses.

The technique is conceptually simple: identify something important in the present, trace back its historical development and then cast that rate of development ahead into the future and see what that reveals.

For example, if you want to forecast the population size of a community for the next twenty years by trend analysis, you might find out what the population was twenty years into the past, and see how it has grown (or fallen, or cycled up and down) each year to the present, and then extrapolate whatever you find to be the historical "shape of the curve" into the future. If population has grown at a more or less steady amount per year in the past, then you might extrapolate that amount steadily into the future. Or if you find that the rate of population growth has increased more or less steadily each year, then you might use that increasing rate of growth to forecast the future (and you would get a much larger number if the "rate of growth" were used in contrast to the amount of growth year: the rate is multiplicative while the amount is just added to the total).

However, you may find that the population rises and falls in some steady pattern of inmigration and outmigration, and so forecast that cycle into the future.

The point is, whatever you find to be the case historically is what you trend-forecast into the future.

Trend analysis is very useful. It helps you see what might be the case "if trends continue" in the future as they did in the past. But trend analysis is seldom an accurate "prediction" because "trends seldom continue." Something always seems to happen to interrupt most trends. And these things might be the things which could better be understood by the methods of cyclical, age-cohort, or technological analysis.

Or, the trend might not continue because of interference by an "emerging issue."

So let's take a look at what "emerging issue analysis" is in contrast to trend analysis. We are following the perspective first identified by Graham Molitor in his article, "How to anticipate public-policy changes".

As we have said many times before, very thing that exists now at one time did not exist. Everything that is a big problem now--that everyone know about, is concerned about, has an opinion about, hears discussed on Twitter, blogs, talk shows on TV and the

radio as well as over the backyard fence, is the subject of speeches in the legislature--everything like that at one time did not exist. This thing that everyone knows about may be a technology, a social institution, a religious belief, a political ideology, a disease, an astronomical event--anything!

But at one time it did not exist. No one had ever heard of it, or worried about it, or perhaps even imagined it. But now, every one does.

Well, everything like that at some point in time "emerged"--peaked up into view, although almost no one saw it when it did. But some one did, and said so on her blog, but no one paid any attention--she was known to be unreliable, a bit flaky, always worried about things that bothered no one.

But a few of her companions also noticed it, and began to talk about it on their blogs. But who were they? Outcasts, druggies, criminals, misfits, malcontents, street people, college professors.

Yes, finally a college professor noticed it, and mentioned it in class, where no one else could hear. The students had long since known to discount anything that professor said. "Loony toones" they said.

But then a few of the professor's loony companions took it up, and began to talk about it over coffee and on their blogs. And then someone wrote an article about it, but no respectable journal would publish it, so they posted it online, where it was roundly dismissed. Except that someone in Finland read about it, and said he had seen the same thing in Bosnia when he was there recently.

So more and more people began to notice it, and talk about it, and write about it. Respectable journals of highbrow opinion began to publish articles about it. Then it was mentioned, in passing, on "All Things Considered"--public radio that hardly anyone listens too.

But it did appear in a back page of the New York Times. And then a public access TV show in San Francisco did a show on it. And that was picked up by a local TV station in the Bay Area, and later by the San Francisco Chronicle.

Meanwhile, academia had begun to focus in on it. It was being discussed by many scholars. Conventions were being held, and it was often debated online.

Finally, it hit the major TV stations and newspapers. Oprah had some children of perverts who had taken it to extremes tell embarrassing stories about their mothers who had done it. The Blogosphere was full of it.

Finally, people were demanding somebody do something about this. There ought to be a law. It ought to be outlawed. It was disgusting.

But others said no, that it was divine, and began to worship it, and demand religious protection.

It became the talk of the town; the rage of the continent. Something everyone had an opinion about.

But, eventually, the furor past. People got used to it. Young people grown up with it all around them, and treated it as perfectly natural and ordinary; certainly no big thing.

And eventually it just sort of died out. No one noticed it any more. In fact, there wasn't much to notice.

And then, years and years later, someone wrote a PhD. dissertation about it, and that was that. It was as dead as a doornail--whatever a "doornail" is.

So there you have it--the life cycle of everything: from nothing to something tiny, to something growing rapidly, to something very prominent, to something accepted and barely noticed, to something declining, to something dead and buried.

And sometimes staying buried, but sometimes, years later somehow rising from the dead as something new, unnoticed, controversial, and...well, on and on it goes.

Trend analysis focuses on things when they are already well under way--long after they initially emerged, but before they have become commonplace.

Trend analysis focuses on things that already have a history of development that can be traced and forecast.

Emerging issues analysis, in contrast, focuses on things just as they are emerging--as close to their very first notice as possible; certainly before they become a well-established "trend," and never as a commonplace "problem".

Trend analysis can use facts and figures, since the thing has been noted, documented, tracked.

Emerging issues analysis has no such clear facts and figures. Instead, it tries to see things that are barely visible. Its sources are crazy people, marginal people, off-beat publications and websites, in the recesses of the mind of some scientist or engineer. The concern of some artist or poet, or unpublished novelist.

Or at least, after it has emerged a bit, in obscure academic publications or blogs, talked about over too many beers at Anna Banannas. Or after hours of food and sleep-deprived meditation.

Or, if you can't locate anything in the earliest and subsequent period of emergence, then look for emerging patterns--for something that is for the first time being discussed in lots of different websites, blogs, journals, or academic circles. Patterns are often more important than isolated items, but they are a bit farther up the life cycle of growth of an issue.

Now, both trend analysis and emerging issue analysis are important. But if you really want to be a futurist, you need to become good at emerging issues analysis.

So we have two homework assignments for you. One is to demonstrate to yourself that the theory of emerging issue analysis is correct by taking something obvious and commonplace in the present and finding its earliest mention. Then trace its growth to the present.

Then we will ask you to find an emerging issue of your own--something hidden, obscure, unknown BUT REAL in the present which could grow into an important problem or opportunity in the future.

OR OPPORTUNITY. We have been talking entirely about the emergence and growth of "problems", but you must understand that "opportunities" follow the same pattern of emergence and growth. There are solutions to present "problems" lying in future "opportunities" which you should try to identify, and nurture.

So emerging issues analysis looks both for emerging opportunities as well as emerging problems.

Sometimes this process of looking for emerging issues and trends is called "Environmental Scanning." Note that this use of "environment" does not mean just looking at ecological or "natural" objects. Here, "environmental scanning" refers to the act of looking for evidence of emerging issues or trends that might be of importance to you, your firm, your institution, or your community. The article by Richard Slaughter shows that more and more organizations are involved in Environmental Scanning in an effort to prevent, or be prepared for, future problems and to take advantage of new opportunities as soon as possible.