

Understanding and Managing Anticipatory Ecosystems: Case Finnish Foresight 2020

Matti Minkkinen, Laura Pouru, Burkhard Auffermann

Societies are increasingly saturated with anticipation. On the policy level, various future outlooks, scenario reports and plans are continuously drafted. Economies are partly built on fictional expectations (Beckert, 2013). Traditional media and social media generate and distribute diverse images of the future, and individuals and societal groups have their own hopes, fears and aspirations. Network approaches are a natural fit for studying anticipation, which Chris Groves calls an “environmentally distributed capacity” (Groves, 2017). In the network of societal anticipation, explicit foresight processes are only one part. However, they are an important part, because they provide opportunities to systematically explore and construct alternative futures and coordinate action. Recent foresight literature suggests that foresight is increasingly open, distributed and networked (Georghiou & Keenan, 2006; Wiener, Gattringer, & Strehl, 2018). System-level policy foresight is characterized by aspirations of shaping the future in the context of competing objectives, interests and time horizons (Volkery & Ribeiro, 2009). Despite the importance of the topic, it is difficult to find in-depth studies of “actually existing foresight” in the literature.

Our paper investigates Finland’s national foresight system as a case of anticipation as a network and suggests ways to understand, visualise and develop the anticipatory network. The paper is based on our research project “National Foresight 2020 – Mapping of the ecosystem, evaluation of foresight maturity and future recommendations” funded by the Finnish Prime Minister’s Office 2019–2020.

The Finnish national foresight system consists of foresight work done by various actors at the levels of local government and national government and coordinated by the Foresight Steering Group. In 2014, the Finnish Prime Minister’s Office established a national foresight approach (Prime Minister’s Office Reports, 2014). Since then, national foresight efforts have been significantly developed, for instance by publishing concise “drivers for change cards” based on foresight work in all Finnish ministries (Prime Minister’s Office, 2017). However, for further development of the nation-wide approach a detailed overview of the interlinked foresight actors and processes is needed.

We suggest considering foresight as an ecosystem rather than the mechanistic system metaphor. By foresight ecosystem, we mean a dynamic and organic assemblage of diverse foresight efforts. Our paper analyzes the Finnish foresight ecosystem in terms of actors, networks, goals, foresight maturity, approaches, methods and outputs. The foresight work in the Finnish ecosystem stems from various traditions: technology-oriented foresight, innovation and business intelligence foresight, competence and education foresight, the tradition of futures research, the tradition coming from societal-political think tanks and the structured foresight processes of the national government (Ramboll, 2013 based on Hjelt et al., 2009). These actors have varied resources, methods and approaches for doing foresight.

The paper is based on empirical material collected during spring and summer 2019 using a nation-wide survey and interviews of key actors. We conduct a comprehensive mapping of foresight capabilities and modes of foresight in the Finnish foresight ecosystem. First, we heuristically utilize René Rohrbeck's model of organizational future orientation (2011) to get an overview of the information, methods, networks, organizations and cultures prevailing in the Finnish ecosystem. Furthermore, we investigate the foresight processes using three ideal-typical foresight approaches: 1) short-term, low uncertainty, 2) long-term, high uncertainty and 3) short term, high uncertainty (Minkkinen, Auffermann & Ahokas, under review). These are loosely analogous to Ilkka Tuomi's categorisation of probabilistic, possibilistic and constructivist foresight (Tuomi, 2019). Within each type, we distinguish between approaches characterized by high or low agency (proactive/exploratory) and high or low systems perception (holistic/analytical). These frameworks allow us to investigate the characteristics of individual processes and to situate processes in relation to one another. We also investigate interlinkages between foresight processes, potential sources of tension and the degree of centralization within the network.

Our paper contributes to studies of anticipatory networks by providing a detailed analysis and visual overview of a particular case: the Finnish nation-wide anticipatory ecosystem. Each foresight ecosystem is likely to be unique, but we argue that our methodology is suitable for studying anticipatory networks of various types. Our paper also suggests several questions for subsequent studies. What is the role of path-dependence and history in shaping an anticipatory network? What is an appropriate level of analysis for anticipatory networks, which range from networked individuals to organizations, cities, states and transnational networks? How do anticipatory networks actually contribute to decision-making and value creation?

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Matti Minkkinen (MA) is working as a project researcher and preparing a PhD on futures of privacy protection at Finland Futures Research Centre, University of Turku. He was the first graduate from the current Master's Degree Programme in Futures Studies, and his research interests cover qualitative futures research methodology, the concept of futures consciousness and the topic areas of privacy, security and digital futures. Mr. Minkkinen teaches master's level courses on ethics of futures studies and futures research methods in practice and has given talks on scenario methodology and causal layered analysis, among other topics.

Laura Pouru (M.Soc.Sc; MA) works as a Project Coordinator at Finland Futures Research Centre (FFRC) at the University of Turku. Her main task is to manage the research, education and development activities of the UNESCO Chair in Learning Society and Futures of Education, with the overall aim of improving global well-being through better societal futures awareness and individual futures literacy skills. She has several years of experience of doing foresight work in the Finnish public sector.

Dr. Phil. **Burkhard Auffermann** works as a Senior Research Fellow at Finland Futures Research Centre. Ph. D. in Political Science/International Relations Freie Universität Berlin (1994). Between 1987 different positions as a junior and senior professor in Political Science/International Relations at the Universities of Berlin (West), Tampere (Finland) and Helsinki. 1995-1998 Jean-Monnet Professor for European Integration and Regional Cooperation at the University of Tampere. Supervising doctoral students and coordinating research projects since early 1990s. Work package leader in the FP7 research projects FESTOS (on new technologies and risks) and PRACTIS (on emerging technologies and risks for privacy), Jean Monnet chair on European integration and regional cooperation. Currently sub-project leader ("scenarios") in the WINLAND project (Academy of Finland/Finnish government) on comprehensive societal security (food, water, energy) under conditions of climate change. Recent research and expertise on

comprehensive societal security under conditions of climate change, European Studies, integration theories, international organizations, security policies, organized crime, energy policy strategies, sustainable development.