

Foreword by Deb Westphal

Chairman of the Board of Toffler Associates

After Shock

The world's foremost futurists
reflect on 50 years of

Future Shock

and look ahead to the next 50

Edited by John Schroeter

Will We Ever Learn To Take the Future Seriously?

Paul Saffo

Future Shock is unquestionably one of the most influential books published in the second half of the

20th century. ■ Specifically, its arresting title has entered our vocabulary as a ubiquitous meme, and that is a problem. “Creative destruction,” “the medium is the message,” “paradigm shift,” and “future shock.” All are phrases uttered more frequently than they are understood, more often than not by individuals who can’t name their authors and have never actually read their work.

This is the curse of all original thinkers. They reveal an insight so profound that it becomes obvious the moment it is stated. Amidst the pleasant flash of discovery, everyone forgets that they were utterly blind to the now-obvious idea and, in so doing, fail to pursue its deeper implications.

In the case of *Future Shock*, the result is the opposite of what Toffler intended. Its ubiquity has elevated, or relegated, “future shock” to the status of a toss-away meme invoked to deflect examination of the very uncertainties of which Toffler sought to warn us. Because we know that future shock is a thing, then surely we are prepared for whatever might come, and the future cannot possibly shock us.

Future Shock’s 50th anniversary is thus the perfect occasion to set matters straight and return the meaning of future shock to that of an invitation to look more deeply into what the future holds. A good place to begin is by recognizing that this is the 50th anniversary of the book, but not the idea.

Toffler first articulated the idea of future shock in an essay, “The Future as a Way of Life,” published

in the Summer 1965 issue of *Horizon* magazine. Written while he was still a writer at *Fortune* magazine, this essay crisply and succinctly defines future shock as “... a time phenomenon, a product of the greatly accelerated rate of change in society. It arises from the superimposition of a new culture on an old one. It is culture shock in one’s own society.”

I actually prefer the *Horizon* article to the book published five years later. It remains as fresh and relevant today as when it first appeared. For Toffler newcomers, it succinctly expresses the essence of the future shock concept. Others already familiar with the Tofflers’ work will find the article a fascinating roadmap, anticipating how they elaborated and expanded their ideas into the book.

But the most important contribution of the *Horizon* article is its call to take the future seriously, to build tools and institutions dedicated to exploring what lies ahead. And above all, to create a culture in which anticipating the future becomes the everyday concern of everyone, not just experts.

Arriving when it did, Toffler’s article gave a huge boost to a nascent future studies field that until then was the relatively obscure province of researchers at government think tanks and a handful of corporations. Pioneers like Herman Kahn at the Hudson Institute, Olaf Helmer at RAND, and Ted Gordon at Douglas Aircraft (whose book *The Future* was published in 1965) had already been making a passionate but largely ignored case for futures thinking. Their cause received an enormous boost from the attention drawn to the field by then-journalists Alvin and Heidi Toffler.

The result was a dramatic uptick in interest in the future as a discipline that greatly aided the establishment of several future-oriented think tanks and the founding of the World Future Society in 1966. It also led to a mini-boom in serious books about the future, including Kahn and Wiener’s 1967 classic, *The Year 2000: A Framework for Speculation on the Next Thirty-Three Years*.

In short, the 1965 *Horizon* essay and subsequent early work by Al and Heidi Toffler was crucial to moving future research as a discipline into the mainstream. Publication of *Future Shock* in 1970 cemented this trend, boosting public interest even further and making the 1970s the golden age of futures research and thinking. Future studies programs began to appear at universities, and “Futurist” was a title seen at more and more companies.

Even Congress got the message, and in 1972 formed its own futurist think tank, the Office of Technology Assessment. As the decade unfolded, a combination of environmental worries, Earth Day, the oil crisis, and the advent of the digital revolution provided both the incentive and the prospect of new tools, making the Tofflers’ 1965 vision of the future as a “way of life” seem a welcome inevitability.

Then the 1980s arrived, and the vision of a robust, widely adopted futures research order went into decline. Long-range thinking became unfashionable during the Reagan/Thatcher era. Futurism was ridiculed in Washington, and futurists were derided as flaky blue-sky California types in a climate focused on “pragmatic” short-termism. Many of the futures institutions created only a decade earlier dropped out of existence, and the few that remained lowered once-ambitious expectations and struggled to survive what amounted to a Futurist Winter.

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Through all of this, the Tofflers continued their work with admirable steadiness and dedication, producing several new books and even launching an advisory group aimed at waking up Washington. This work was vital to helping keep the struggling futures field from extinction by neglect. Futures research receded into the background, but it did not disappear.

The 1990s were a mix of good and bad news for foresight. Angered by its reports that inconveniently conflicted with their rigid ideology, conservatives in Washington, led by Newt Gingrich, managed to finally shut down the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment in 1995. But the arrival of cyberspace in the form of the World Wide Web, plus public fascination with the approaching millennium, gave new life to the futures discipline. The Tofflers contributed to this revival with three important books, *Powershift* in 1990, *Creating a New Civilization*, and *War and Anti-War* in 1995.

The Futurist Winter was over at last, but the new interest in futurism still fell short of the Tofflers' 1965 vision. The giddy optimism of the dot-com revolution and the vast distraction of personal media made futurism cool, not as serious study, but as entertainment splashed across the pages of *Wired* magazine and other publications.

Futurists proliferated, but rigorous foresight languished. In an ironic twist, the arrival of the web disrupted the business model of the few surviving futures research organizations. Leading think tanks like Global Business Network eventually ceased to exist, while others survived by abandoning serious research, turning themselves into facilitators and futurist entertainers selling their services to the few corporate customers still willing to pay for futures-oriented consulting.

The optimistic futures worldview of the late 1990s was punctured by 9/11 and a bursting dot-com bubble, and then crushed by the second Iraq War and the 2007 market crash. Compared to the mood in 2000, futures thinking today is more sober, but remains longer on show than substance. Serious futures work continues, and at moments thrives, but both its scale and impact still fall far short of what the Tofflers and others hoped for half a century ago.

Meanwhile, the challenges facing us continue to grow. The phenomenon of future shock is fueled by the ever-increasing gap between exponentially advancing technology and slowly evolving culture. To it, we can now add the widening gap between the myriad threats facing humanity and the sluggish advance of our ability to anticipate consequences and outcomes. We are struggling to understand 21st-century problems with 20th-century foresight methods. And we live among a public that thinks because the concept of future shock is familiar, they cannot be surprised by anything the future holds.

This is what makes *Future Shock* even more relevant now than when it was first published. This is a moment when unease has displaced optimism, and pessimism is poised to become the new and fashionable black. Uncertainty has never been greater, making irresistible the temptation to focus on the short term and simply hope things work out in the long term. If Al and Heidi Toffler were here, they would remind us that our essential task is to form a better, clearer, stronger conception of what lies ahead. This, as they observed in 1965, is the only remedy for the phenomenon of future shock. It is time—past time, actually—to finally take the future seriously. ■

Paul Saffo is a Silicon Valley-based forecaster who has devoted over three decades to exploring the dynamics and impacts of large-scale, long-term change. He teaches foresight at Stanford and Chairs Future Studies at Singularity University. He first read *Future Shock* in high school and has relied on Al Toffler's insights, advice and friendship for his entire professional career.