



Introduction: New Media and the Imagination of the Future

Simone Natale and Benjamin Beil

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Introduction:
**New Media and the Imagination of the
Future**

Simone Natale,

Humboldt University Berlin

Predictions and forecasts play a paramount role in contemporary societies. The capacity to forecast the future is often presented as one of the main responsibilities for everyone who works with media and technology, as well as in other fields. [Financial companies](#) ground their advertising campaigns and public image on their supposed capacity to grasp the future; [politicians](#) promise to have a clear vision of the challenges for the future; academic scholars (e.g. Spigel, 2005), [journalists](#), and [bloggers](#) struggle to foresee new trends and directions. In fields such as international politics and political economy, the growing demand for anticipatory knowledge has dramatically changed the agenda and the practices of consultancy companies and think tanks (Colonos, 2012). Across the natural and social sciences, scientific hypotheses are weighted on their predictive power. Also, new forecasting technologies and cultural techniques that provide predictions based on statistical patterns find applications in industry, planning, and administration. Think, for instance, of Amazon's anticipatory shipping, or the algorithms that predict user behaviours in Google ads.

This special issue of *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media* tackles the relationship between new media and the imagination of the future. Taking under scrutiny how new technologies are inserted into particular

visions of the upcoming world, we argue for the necessity and urgency of critical approaches to predictions and forecasts. Claims about the future of digital media are often presented as innocent and unbiased. This is probably due to their speculative character: like all statements about the future, they refer to the order of possibility rather than to that of reality. Yet, their supposed neutrality is largely an illusion. In fact, predictions may have real effects, and are often, if not always, linked to particular interests and particular groups. Rather than regarding them as mere speculations, we should treat them as cultural visions with their own ideological, political and social bias. It is of key importance, in this sense, to address not only the question of what the media of the future will be and how new media will change our society, but also to interrogate why certain representations of the future are created, proposed, and supported. We must also address how these representations influence our choices and our understandings of technological change.

Although social sciences and humanities scholars often regard the future as the ultimate horizon of knowledge, the question of why and how we develop certain imaginations of the future is usually left aside. In 2013, for instance, as the interdisciplinary scholarly network [HASTAC](#) organized an international conference in Toronto to mark its decennial, the coordinators asked researchers and artists to define what is yet to come. They [invited submissions](#) engaging “in the creative, if impossible, attempt to glimpse the digital future” and they challenged panelists and speakers to shape it. If emphasis was given to the production of claims about the future of digital media, however, the question of what it means to engage in predictions and forecasts was disregarded. The conference aimed to imagine the digital future, without interrogating explicitly what lies behind such imagination. In an attempt to fill this gap, the articles collected in this issue present case studies and theoretical reflections that provide ground for a critical examination of predictions on media. By addressing the future of media as a cultural discourse that can be interpreted as such, this issue therefore proposes to account for more serious considerations of what our claims and visions about the world tend to be. We believe that, in order for speculations on the future to provide veritable contributions to contemporary discourses on media and culture, we also need to approach our imagination of the digital future from the perspective of critical theory and cultural analysis.

While we also address the imagination of the future in reference to the broader field of media technologies, particular emphasis is given to mobile media. In fact, few other technological fields are today

the subject of our speculations about future ways to communicate and to use digital technologies. As Imar De Vries (2013, p. 12) points out, mobile media are often presented as “the self-evident technological expressions of a natural progression in the quest for ever-improved communication.” In contemporary science fiction, as well as in non-fictional technological forecasts, people of tomorrow are imagined as networked individuals whose movement is technologically guided and enhanced by digital media. The widespread perception that mobile media *are* the future represents a challenge for scholars in mobilities who explore the relationship between the predictions and the cultural representations these technologies invite, within the public sphere (Sawchuk, 2010). Additionally, this challenge exists for scholars who explore the imagined futures that shape our affects and everyday lives (Anderson, 2006).

Despite the future being constitutionally an evanescent subject, a tradition of works addressing technological predictions and forecasts has been established within media studies, particularly in North America. According to Marshall McLuhan, in the age of electric media the future is not what is used to be, “for at electric speed it is necessary to anticipate the future in order to live in the present, and vice versa” (qtd. in Acland, 2007, p. 39). James Carey, a foundational figure of American cultural studies, also accorded much relevance to this topic, dedicating an essay written in collaboration with John Quirk to the “history of the future.” Carey and Quirk (1989) observed that the *future as an idea* has a definite history. In fact, it functioned as a trope throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century in the United States, in particular. It was “a powerful political and cultural weapon” (174) for the building of a narrative of progress and redemption that ultimately contributed to revitalize optimism and dismiss dissent.

A similar perspective was developed by scholars working from the standpoint of history of technology and media. Drawing from the concept of the “technological sublime” (Marx, 1964), scholars such as David Nye (1994, 2004), Joseph Corn (1986), and more recently Vincent Mosco (2004) highlight how different media and technology inspire the creation of powerful cultural myths in which visions of the future play a paramount role. Additionally, within the communication studies tradition, Ithiel De Sola Pool and his collaborators have interrogated the role of predictions in media innovations, addressing how inventors, engineers, and commentators foresaw the social effects of the telephone from 1876 until World War II. In examining different claims made by different social agents, they noted that the actual developers of the

telephone were more successful in their forecasts than any other group. The reason for this, they speculated, is that developers play an active role in fulfilling their own prophecies: “they had inventions, a vision of how the inventions could be used, and they controlled the businesses that implemented those visions” (De Sola Pool et al., 1977, p. 129). In De Sola Pool’s essay, therefore, we already find the idea that predictions are connected to particular powers and interest groups.

The historical approach that characterizes most works from this body of literature is, of course, not coincidental. The most evident characteristics of the future is that it does not exist yet. As a consequence, only a retrospective approach can tell us if certain predictions have been fulfilled or not. Similarly, only through a retrospective approach, can we know which cultural dynamics triggered predictions of the future. Historical approaches, therefore, allow a more comprehensive and informed cultural analysis of claims about the future than contemporary predictions do. Yet, the privilege of history in the study of visions of the future should be seen as a resource rather than an obstacle in the study of how futures are imagined in contemporary societies. In fact, the history of the future provides us with a deeper understanding of the role of technological predictions in the formation of cultural and political discourse, which can shape our critical approach to the rhetoric and the myths surrounding today’s digital media. As Benjamin Peters (Peters, 2009, p. 15) argued, we should “push beyond the common sense fact that history is past and that new media is now.” Predictions on the future of digital media seem to follow a pattern similar to the media prophecies of the past: on the one hand, they reflect our fear of change; on the other hand, they express our hope and a well-established rhetoric of progress and enthusiasm for the new. For instance, the recent commercial success of e-Readers stimulated negative and nostalgic predictions about the possible “death” of the paper book and, simultaneously, catalyzed utopian views concerning the formation of all-encompassing digital libraries and the enhancement of collective intelligence (Carrière & Eco, 2011).

In this context, the articles that follow provide case studies and theoretical viewpoints to address the imagination of the future in connection to media and mobility. Stemming from different disciplinary, national, and theoretical viewpoints, the authors of the articles collected in this issue share the aim to tackle predictions and forecasts as cultural constructs that are embedded in political, social, cultural, and ideological frames. In his article, Andrea Ballatore addresses a cultural myth that has shaped discussions

about mobile media and locative technologies. He describes the “digital earth” as a high-resolution representation of the planet that shares and analyzes detailed information about its state. Ballatore follows the origins of this myth in the rhetoric employed by American politician Al Gore, showing how the vice-president combined the environmentalist discourse with an enthusiastic vision of the role that digital media will play in our society. The creation of a trajectory for the future of the earth coincided, in this case, with an act of myth-making. A myth with roots that reached into a wide range of cultural, social, and religious meanings associated to the world of media and technology as well as to environmentalism and to the geographic imagination. In this regard, Ballatore’s essay asks how representations of the future of digital media are linked not only to particular narratives of the role of technology in our society, but also to other elements of contemporary culture.

In the article to follow, Grant Wythoff adopts a historical and media-archaeological perspective to explore how technologies and devices of the future are imagined, created and discussed within the public sphere. Focusing on the case study of the entrepreneurial and editorial activities of American inventor and writer Hugo Gernsback, the article shows how a speculative language emerged in early-twentieth-century advertisements of his company, the Electro Importing Company. Wythoff also explores Gernsback’s role in the amateur experimenter magazines he edited. Wythoff shows that speculations were inserted within a technical context in which futuristic and sometimes fantastic predictions were presented through a lens of supposed scientific rationality. Hinting at the possibility of using the earth’s tide to produce energy, to send wireless messages to the planet Mars, or to build a machine that would read minds, the speculative ideas proposed by Gernsback are testaments to the impressive width of the spectre of possibilities imagined at the threshold of the twentieth century. They also demonstrate the extent to which lines in public discourses on technology can become blurred, often obscuring the distinction between the real and the imagined.

In his contribution, Benjamin Beil focuses more firmly on the analysis of fictional predictions, interrogating how the animated television series *Futurama* constructs a representation of the future that is strongly shaped by the depiction of new media technologies. Beil – who co-edited this issue – is particularly interested in the ways science fiction play with the contrast between the future and the past, depicting a world in which what is yet to come constantly intertwines with what has already been. Drawing on the case

study of *Futurama*, the article suggests that the imagination of the future emerge from an act of creation but also - and perhaps especially - from an excavation of the past. As retro and nostalgic elements are embedded in the representation of the future, our imaginative time travel reveals a multidirectional trajectory that needs to move backward in order to reach forward.

Working from a theoretical standpoint, Jens Schröter criticizes the particular vision of the future of media that characterizes the approach known as the “general ecology” of media. Such an approach is based on a specific representation of the future of media: namely, that media technologies will become smaller, more mobile, ubiquitous, and at the same time smarter and capable of perception and feeling. Schröter notes that this approach does not take into account the economic dimension of the upcoming changes, arguing that the prediction of the future of media must not be separated from the future of society. Additionally, by pointing to a historical case study of a specific prediction on the future of technology attempted in the 1950s, the article highlights how a critique of current predictions should always be grounded on a retrospective, historical approach.

The issue is completed by the reviews of two books: *Utopia: Social Theory and the Future*, edited Jacobsen and and Tester, and de Vries’ *Tantalisingly Close: An Archaeology of Communication Desires in Discourses of Mobile Wireless Media*. Finally, in the afterword, historian of technology David Nye stresses the centrality of commerce in the proliferation of technological predictions. He reminds us that the imagination of the future involves acts of literary creation as much as the creation of things, business, and money. Nye is the author of numerous books and essays addressing the intersection between the way technologies are developed and how they are imagined and perceived. He has written on the “technological sublime,” mainly in relationship with infrastructures such as railroads, bridges, and skyscrapers; in closing this issue, he suggests that today’s digital media take up just as much space in our imagination as do the physical objects that surround us.

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