



future news

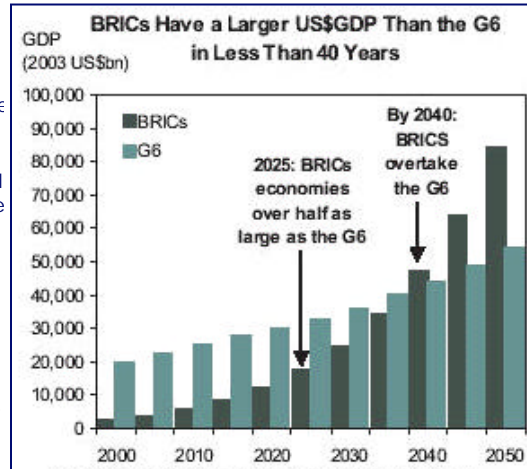
a newsletter from the *futures* foundation Vol. 10 No. 2 March 2005

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...watch out for flying BRICs!

Coverage of last month's G7 meetings in Europe concentrated on huge debt write-offs agreed by the leading industrial nations - US, UK, France, Canada, Italy, Japan and Germany. Winning a lot less attention was the presence of a number of developing nations which collectively make up a powerful bloc of the future, writes business futurist Andrew Zolli. Known as the BRICs (for Brazil, Russia, India and China) the emerging bloc includes the most significant, most rapidly developing nations. Zolli quotes William Pesek of Bloomberg, who suggested that inclusion of BRICs in the summit signals recognition that the G7 may not be the best club for managing global growth. It also suggested that Goldman Sachs had a point when it predicted in 2003 that the BRICs economies could soon rival the G7. That forecast shows how sustained economic development and productivity gains in the rapidly developing nations, the impact of

demographic forces in Europe and Asia, and trends in energy consumption could propel the BRICs ahead of the G6 by 2050. In this scenario, the largest economies of the world would no longer be the richest, in per-capita income terms, but a group comprised comprised equally of both wealthy nations and fast followers. China's economy, in dollar terms, exceeds the US economy sometime in the 2040s and India's becomes third-largest, the three collectively towering over their nearest competitors. "The BRICs composite nations are now eagerly strengthening bilateral relations with one another," writes Zolli, "creating joint environmental plans and, under the guidance of Vladimir Putin, seeking a BRICs-wide multi-lateral alliance. Meanwhile, with India and China now on an omnivorous search for oil, the US (and EU's) ability to negoti-



One of the graphics from www.zpluspartners.com

ate with pariah states, like Sudan and Iran, on issues ranging from genocide to non-proliferation, is hampered by the BRICs' energy needs. "All of this raises the question: what is the long-term geopolitical impact of the inevitable chaffing between the G7 and the BRICs? In our current period of significant global instability, several scenarios seem plausible, ranging from a new cold-war with a bloc of nations focused on US containment to the emergence of a new set of relationships, dominated, say, by the US and China, where the two nations' interests are so closely linked that they could effectively split the BRIC bloc. Who knows? Perhaps the prospect of a massively destabilizing and massively expensive competition for oil with the BRICs will be the tipping point the finally pushes the US toward a true green energy revolution."

For more information visit
<http://www.zpluspartners.com>. For Goldman Sachs research visit www.gs.com/insight/research/reports/99.pdf.

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ECO-CONSUMERS IN YOUR FUTURE

Sohail Inayatullah looks at the future of merchandising

Two converging trends promise to change the nature and politics of consumerism. First, rapid developments in technology allow more information, and quicker access to this information. Consumers may simply electronically scan a product they wish to buy (through a wireless hand-held scanner and a standards bar code on the product) or look for a rating on the product itself (through a global rating organization) or use the web to search for information about the product (through a website like www.Consumerlab.com).

Trends in consumer behavior suggest that not just the price but the social and environmental context of a product will become far more decisive in determining the success of products.

Whether from investigative reporting or the globalization of news or from the Net, information about product standards has even reached remote Pakistani villages. Already, the Pakistani or Iranian carpet maker has to consider the local middle-class values oriented shopper as well as human rights oriented Western buyers. They are already beginning to develop their own websites and starting the process of direct global selling.

Along with developments in technology is the dramatic evolution of product standards.

- (1) Initially they were about functionality - does the product work. Will it do what I need it to do?
- (2) Next, issues of price and aesthetics (how good does it look and what does it cost) became dominant.
- (3) Most recently of concern is not the product per se but the identity the product gives to the purchaser - the postmodern turn. Not -- does the t-shirt keep me warm? Nor its price and fit, but what it says on it, how it represents me to others, through the product do I become part of a community?
- (4) But a new phase is starting. These are products whose sales depend on meeting the demands of the rights generation, those who have grown up in the context of UN declarations and conferences - the emerging global civil society. These claims to more inclusiveness include the rights of environment, women, children and labor. What this means is that not only does a product have to be effective, look good and have a competitive price/quality ratio but it also must be made in conditions in which children are not exploited, the environment not

ruined and the hiring practices of the corporation considered fair and representative (equal opportunity to women and others disadvantaged). The Pakistani carpet company that figures this out and markets through the web will have an incredible comparative advantage. And if it shares the wealth with its laborers, its product will be unmatched, as workers will have far more incentives than mere survival or a job. International nongovernmental organizations will jump to promote the ethical product, and slowly and surely, Pakistani carpet exports will expand and Pakistani culture will benefit, leading over time to increased tourism, not to mention an economic revolution.

From a business view, at heart this is about expanding what is counted and what counts. From being concerned about the triple bottom line - profit, society and environment - the fourth bottom line of the future has slowly become important. The perceived impact of a product on future generations must be factored into any development equation. Monsanto's executives found this out recently. In an article in the April 1999 issue of *The Futurist*, Robert Shapiro proclaimed that genetic food modification would

To buy or not to buy, she thought. The carpet looked beautiful but what were the conditions in which it was made? She took out her mobile phone and used it to access the web. She immediately found that the carpet was made in a village cooperative. Profits were shared and the working conditions, while difficult, still were safe. A ranking from the world consumer union showed it to be an 80 star product. "Good but not a perfect 100." Even as a cooperative, most of the profits still went to the distributor. "Perhaps, the Belgian ready-made carpet," she thought. But the ratings on that were even lower. Although labour was not exploited, chemical dyes were used. 70 stars. She did a search of all the carpet companies: none ranked above 80 stars. I'll start on my own business, she reflected. "Totally web-based getting rid of the distributor or would I still need a shop front?" she thought excitedly. But this was getting ahead of herself. She was not quite ready to become a producer. Being an ethical consumer was far more to her liking, and she knew that money spent wisely could, if not save the world, create pressures on businesses to make a better world.

solve the world's food problems. A few weeks later the GM food protest began in Europe and serious questions of side-effects entered the public discourse. Consumers voted with their dollars not just in terms of products they bought but the shares they purchased as well. The stock tumbled, and irrespective of the science involved, the dangers were seen as too great for most, especially the risk to future generations.

Shell has become so concerned about the impact of current policies on future generations that following the suggestion of Darren Schmidt of the Department of Primary Industries (in Kingaroy Australia, amazingly) they keep an empty seat at meetings representing the ghost of future generations. Since future generations cannot speak, the seat becomes the voice of the future, reminding strategic planners that all decisions must speak to the future. Thus even Shell, indirectly responsible for the tragedy that has been Nigeria, has begun to find ways for others to speak. This is not only smart politically but leads to more accurate forecasting.

But while the Nigerian villager still has to depend on others for her voice, those in OECD nations have become information-rich, technology giving them the possibility of self-empowerment. With very little effort web searches allow one to discern which products have been made in fair conditions. Such searches and purchasing also allow one to become part of a community of ethical consumers.

And these are early days. The technology will come in stages. First was the computer. Second was the Net. Third is our relationship to the Net, or My Net, the use of the Net for an individual's specific information needs. Eventually, the computer will disappear as it becomes everywhere, in our house, our car, our clothes, and eventually within us. As we move to always-on, wearable "computers" that monitor our heart rate, our calories, our spending patterns, that learn about us from us, we will enter into an informational, indeed communicative, relationship with our spending selves, with the part of us that thinks: I shop, therefore I am. "Should I eat the extra chocolate bar?" won't be just a question of conscience but one where there will be immediate data as to the chocolate's impact on my emotions, my weight and, this is crucial, where the chocolate bar was made.

Full story at www.futuresfoundation.org.au

POST-INDUSTRIAL AGRICULTURE FOR OZ?

A case study of Australia makes up the final chapter of Jared Diamond's book, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*. It is there as a warning to advanced economies of what happens when an environment is misunderstood and overworked, writes Paul Sheehan in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (21 02 05).

He points out that conventional farming threatens to destroy Australia's future as the drylands of the interior expand and more landscape is denuded by land clearing, erosion and salinisation. Population is retreating to the coast, where Australians "live in those five big cities which are connected to the outside world rather than to the Australian landscape," as Jared Diamond puts it.

"What amazes Diamond," says Paul Sheehan, "is Australia's determination to cling to the myth that much of the hinterland is critical to the nation's economic health. He sees this as one of the world's great lost causes. "While 60 per cent of Australia's land area and 80 per cent of its human water use are dedicated to agriculture, the value of agriculture relative to other

sectors of the Australian economy has been shrinking to the point where it now contributes less than 3 per cent of the gross national product. That's a huge allocation of land and scarce water to an enterprise of such low value. Furthermore, it is astonishing to realise that over 99 per cent of the agricultural land makes little or no positive contribution to Australia's economy. It turns out that about 80 per cent of Australia's agricultural profits are derived from less than 0.8 per cent of its agricultural land...."

"Most of Australia's remaining agriculture is in effect a mining operation that does not add to Australia's wealth but merely converts environmental capital of soil and native vegetation irreversibly into cash, with the help of indirect government subsidies...."

Diamond also points out that the true economic costs of our agriculture are not recognised because we don't use full costing.... conventional economic measures do not count the cost of permanent landscape degradation, especially the continuing damage to the Great Barrier Reef, which he argues is worth far more to Australia than any

extra agricultural worth being extracted.

"Australia still clears more native vegetation per year than any other First World country ... rotting and burning of the bulldozed vegetation contribute to Australia's annual greenhouse gas emissions a gas quantity approximately equal to the country's total motor vehicle emissions."

Diamond has spent considerable periods of time in Australia, and admits to a special affection for this country that underlies his concern for its future. In NSW, he says, the amount of land under threat of salinisation is 60 times greater than that already ruined or damaged by ignorance.

"Australia illustrates in extreme form the exponentially accelerating horse race in which the world now finds itself," he concludes. But, reports Paul Sheehan, his affection allows for optimism. He sees the continuing environmental decline being offset by growing environmental knowledge and repair.

"He gives us about 50 years to turn it around. In historical terms, we're not edging towards a turning point. We're sprinting."

Branding irony for produce

While Australia's organic produce market is growing, it's not yet booming like organic markets overseas. Europeans seek out organic produce, even take to the streets in its defence. American organic markets are growing fast. International aid organisations are promoting organic farming as a way out of poverty for small farmers because of its steady demand and higher prices. So why is Australia falling behind in this important market of the future?

There's a tendency to explain the puzzle with a chicken-and-egg answer: demand is not consistent enough to encourage the growth of supply; supply is not consistent enough to justify, for example, global marketing programs to generate demand. But behind all this, a marketing or communication expert might suggest, lies the issue of branding. And in a world where "deep branding" is becoming a priceless asset (see story at website), it is ironic that the industry that can withstand the most thorough scrutiny of its production practices is failing to harvest the benefit of its own good work.

More than ten years ago New Zealand embarked

on an ambitious program to establish a global brand identity for its fresh, green produce - and captured disproportionate chunks of global markets. Australia failed to follow suit (despite an early attempt by the Futures Foundation to bring this topic to the attention of government and industry organisations).

The issue is complicated by fragmentation of brand attributes. While New Zealand opted for a cohesive brand message: "New Zealand, clean, green" - Australian produce is sometimes "eco-labelled" for the sustainable practices of its production, and sometimes for the health and nutritional properties of its products. Then there are organics and biodynamics, which combine health and nutrition with social responsibility, including sustainability. As well as these complications, there are other, contextual factors when it comes to brand identification of post-industrial produce.

"Environmental awareness may not be as great here as it is in the US and Europe," explained Robyn Neeson, of the Department of Primary Industry in NSW. "We have not had scares like BSE, or even



Chernobyl, that focused people's attention on food production. We have not had the same sort of problems with fertilisers contaminating waterways, or pesticide spills and other accidents which are pretty high profile there.

"Awareness of food safety does appear to be higher in those markets, and people are more concerned about the nutritional value of food."

Now, however, the combination of science and communication may be making a difference. More and more research is demonstrating a causal relationship between growing practices and the health-giving properties of food; more evidence is emerging to challenge the benefits of controversial genetic engineering practices; and the effects of farming practices on micro-climates are being confirmed through the study of rainfall over the Amazon.

For more stories on these topics, visit www.futuresfoundation.org.au.

Biodynamics: spiritual farming for health and sustainability

Worried about biotechnology? Concerned about its market-driven science? How about a natural alternative?

The practice of biodynamics is rapidly gaining support in organic agriculture, horticulture and viticulture, in Australia and elsewhere. Enthusiastic advocates range from commercial growers and winemakers, to individual gardeners and even schoolchildren around the country. In a fundamental rejection of the western world's current obsession with growth, biodynamics seeks to grow "healthful produce in a natural, self-sustaining environment, rather than forcing spectacular yields", according to Biodynamic Agriculture Australia, a not-for-profit organisation with more than a thousand members in over 24 regional groups. Established in 1989, the association supports members with information and products developed according to the biodynamic method, described as "a theory of agriculture that emphasizes the natural relationships between plants and between plants and the soil and other natural elements". The theory was developed by the Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner in the 1940s, and is sometimes adopted by Steiner schools, who seek to give their students an understanding of the natural environment on which their own health depends. Canberra expert Lynnette West emphasises the spiritual nature of biodynamics: "By bringing together the physical and spiritual aspects of nature we can produce food of the highest standard," she told *Future News*. "The biodynamics practitioner uses good agricultural and/or horticultural practices as well as a set of specially developed preparations. "This method has the capacity to overcome a lot of the environmental problems that have been associated with conventional agriculture, especially with the increasing trend toward industrialised, or 'factory farming' in recent years. It works because it tunes into nature, and works in harmony with the natural processes, rather than fighting them."

According to Biodynamic Agriculture Australia, decades of experience with the biodynamic method on Australian farms have shown that soil can be improved and degradation reversed through the use of its techniques. It emphasises that a healthy, well-structured soil, rich in humus and high in biological activity, is a prerequisite for any sustainable agricultural system. "Mixed farms practising the biodynamic method have been in existence for over 65 years without showing loss of fertility or productivity," it says. "Biodynamic practitioners seek to understand and work with the life processes as well as enhance their understanding of the mineral

processes used in conventional agriculture. "Healthy soil is a prime basis for healthy plants, animals and people. "Pest and disease control is generally managed by developing the farm as a total organism. However, biodynamics practitioners may make use of specific products for weed and pest control, which they make from the weeds and pests themselves. Weeds and pests are very useful indicators of imbalances in soil, plants and animals; and the aim in the Biodynamic method is to use such indicators in a positive way." **For more information visit www.biodynamiceducation.com.au or just google "biodynamics".**

Award winning wine has a kick in it

For some, the word "biodynamic" flashes up mental images of strange rituals and cult-like worship of cows. For others, it is a promise, heralding a new attitude in farming, writes Chris Carpenter of the Lark Hill winery near Canberra. "It's easy to see why both sides of the coin still exist." Biodynamic practices are based on a series of lectures given by Rudolph Steiner in the 1940s, he explains. "Steiner was trying to help farmers, having observed a decline in crop health and yields after many years of intensive farming. His teachings were based on farms of the times - and the people, who were not in a position to buy tonnes of fertiliser or similar remedies. "These lectures were based on improving soil structure and health (structure refers to the size and makeup of soil particles - ranging from powder to lumps). Arguably the fundamental concept of biodynamics is the use of a "500 prep" -- that is, a fermented cow manure. Cows have four stomachs and therefore a huge biomass of microbes - bacteria and fungi -- in order to digest grass. Thus their manure was the most likely to contain a high level of these microbes, compared to a horse's single stomach for example. By fermenting this manure, one

could create a starter culture for these microbes, which are beneficial for soil health. Cow horns were used as containers, as they were known to be resistant to decomposers such as worms." By mixing this "500 prep" with water and aerating it in warm water (much the same way as a brewer prepares yeast for a ferment), the farmer creates a microbe-rich soup to apply to the soil, stimulating soil microbial activity, explains Chris, a partner in the family business and a science student at the Australian National University. "The microbial activity creates a number of outcomes - mostly the conversion of atmospheric nitrogen into a soluble form which plants can use. Another example is a symbiotic relationship between soil fungi and the roots of the plants: the fungi have a huge surface area to take up water and nutrients, which they exchange with the plant for sugar. Obviously the use of herbicides and pesticides kills these microbes, and without constant input, the soil is quickly exhausted." For Lark Hill these concepts are not really very new. Its vines were planted in 1978 on the escarpment looking over Bungendore,



AGAINST THE LORE... SCIENCE CATCHES UP

Advocates of permaculture have argued for years that a new (and very old) approach to vegetation management can work wonders for micro-climates, including increased precipitation. Now, it seems, the scientists agree.

Australian scientists Ann Henderson-Sellers of ANSTO and Dr Kendal McGuffie from the University of Technology Sydney have discovered proof that cutting down forests reduces rainfall. The finding, made independently of other evidence and earlier computer modelling, uses physics and chemistry to show how the climate changes when forests are lost.

Apparently not all water is created from two atoms of "common" hydrogen and one of "regular" oxygen. Instead, about one in every 500 water molecules has its second hydrogen atom replaced by a heavier version called deuterium. The oxygen, too, has a variation: one in every 6500 molecules includes a heavy version of the oxygen atom. These variations have allowed the scientists to track water from the Amazon as it flowed into the Atlantic ocean, evaporated, drifted back over the forest to fall as rain, and eventually returned to the river.

The heavier water molecules were slower to evaporate from rivers and groundwater, but readily released by the leaves of plants and trees through transpiration. This process of transpiration is what pumps the heavy molecules back into the atmosphere, said Professor Henderson-Sellers. However since the 1970s, the ratio of the heavy molecules found in rain over the Amazon and the Andes has significantly declined. According to the scientists, the only possible explanation is that they are no longer being returned to the atmosphere to fall as rain because the vegetation is disappearing.

"With many trees now gone and the forest degraded the moisture that reaches the Andes has clearly lost the heavy isotopes that used to be recycled so effectively," said Professor Henderson-Sellers.

"This is the first demonstration that deforestation has an observable impact on rainfall."

Award winning wine...

where at 860 meters they enjoy a very cool climate with winter rainfall, warm summers and cold nights. From the beginning Chris's parents, Sue and David Carpenter, have used organic practices, without really promoting the fact. The vineyard was used as gathering point for a CSIRO survey on predator mites in the 1990s, as pesticides had never been used and the vineyard had probably the highest population of beneficial mites and predators in Australia. A minimum of herbicides had been used to control under-vine weeds and an attitude of minimal intervention was maintained.

In 2004, Lark Hill began the step from 'organic practices' to fully fledged biodynamics.

"It really wasn't a big change and it seemed like the next logical step," said Chris. "In a vineyard already severely limited by nutrient and moisture deficiencies, there seemed no point trying to 'band-aid' production by giving the vines soft treatment. In our switch to biodynamics, the only thing we've had to stop doing is using herbicide on weeds - the rest was already long in place and needed no adjustment.

"We've now put out many "500" preparations and the effect is dramatic. The fermented cow manure preparation is applied in the late afternoon or early evening. By next morning, the vines already look greener and more vibrant and over the next week we see more growing tips.

"Of course, the proof will be in the drinking: meanwhile, with a little effort and a slight change in attitude, a noticeable difference has already been made."

Previous vintages made under similar conditions certainly confirm that a more natural process suits the wine. The winery has won a long list of awards for its Rieslings, Sauvignon Blanc/Chardonnay, Chardonnay and its Pinot Noir, including a 2002 Chardonnay ranked "Top Aussie White" by Huon Hooke, and a 2003 version that flies Business Class with Qantas. But they're not resting on these laurels, says Chris Carpenter.

"Over winter, we will be constructing a massive compost heap, in order to mulch under the vines. This will choke out competitive growth and reduce moisture loss. The hardest part to get used to in the process has been leaving weeds growing - the vineyard doesn't look neat or kempt, instead it

looks alive, thriving and a little like a jungle! We have encouraged a range of native grasses to grow in the sward of each row and will look at sub-sowing this area with nitrogen-fixing lupins this winter. "For Lark Hill, the move to biodynamic practices in the winery has required very few changes. Biodynamic practices allow a low level of 'free' preservative in the wine, and our standard practices were already below that. In recent years, we have been working on reducing dissolved oxygen in the wine and reducing the amount of preservative used through the winemaking process, therefore reducing the 'bound' preservative levels and, as a result, the likelihood of allergy responses in the consumer. "

Further information: www.larkhillwine.com.au.

Organics help beat poverty

Farmers in developing countries who switch to organic agriculture achieve higher earnings and a better standard of living, according to studies conducted in China, India, and six Latin American countries. The findings were presented during a workshop held on February 24 at the World Bank's headquarters in Washington, DC.

Mything out on food safety

Conventional farming is dependent on synthetic biocides (pesticides, fungicides and herbicides), says Andre Feu, Chair of the Organic Federation of Australia. "These poisons are used in food production to kill pests, diseases and weeds. More than 7200 registered biocide products are used in Australian agriculture.... Regulatory authorities assure us that these poisons have been rigorously tested and are used safely on our foods and in our environment." However there are some dangerous myths about agricultural chemicals that need to be challenged.

Full stories: www.futuresfoundation.org.au

PAST & FUTURE IN A HOTEL ROOM

"You want to rearrange the furniture and other equipment... You go to your laptop, pull up the snapshot of the room, drag and drop the equipment to its desired location and press the 'go' button," says a program note for the World Future Society conference, to be held in Chicago in July.

"The equipment starts moving and gets arranged as desired. Next, you want to make the room a little bigger. Well, the process is the same because the walls are remote-controlled and moveable too."

It sounds fascinating, but this is not fiction, insists the presenter. With a combination of technologies involving materials science, sensors, wireless, robotics and intelligent computing, such mobility will not only be a possibility but a way of life.

All of this should be good news to the Holiday Inn group, which has announced its own study of "the hotel room of the future", in a vision which anticipates the need for customers to have more control over their environment. Control, in this case, includes curtains and glass walls that could be transformed with adjustable coloured lighting, a "personal beverage station" filled with the guest's favourite drinks, virtual links with fitness instructors, not to mention a workout mat that responds to foot pressure with a readout on calorie count, body weight and blood pressure. This room invites guests to tailor it to their own needs, with a "fiber optically lit carpet swaying to star lights twinkling on the ceiling above the bed".

Hope they're not planning to introduce these features into eastern Slovakia quite yet.

"Without a permission from the hotel's management, guests are not allowed to move furnishings or make modificatious interfere anyhow into electricity system or make any instalations" read rule number 13 on the list of HOTEL ACCOMMODATION RULES in our hotel room in Zilina in January.

(Rule No.2 explained that "The hotel provides accommodated guests with services in volume regulated by a relevant business line standard of the relevant category".) Guests were allowed to meet visitors in their rooms between 8 am and 10 pm, but only with "a permission by a competent hotel receptionist and after their signing in the Visit Book", and upon leaving, guests were "required to close water taps, switch off all lights in rooms and bathrooms, lock doors and leave keys at the specific place".

After a week in cosmopolitan Vienna - and even Slovakia's own more western Bratislava - the old-Soviet flavour of authoritarian bureaucracy offered a fascinating example of cultural geography.

Jan Lee Martin

PS There were 24 rules, but luckily for Future News they failed to include one that said "Do not remove this list of rules from the guest book."

Intelligent networks or dumb groups?

The processes of decision-making are coming under new scrutiny in the wake of some catastrophic decisions by world experts. And amongst others, theories of distributed intelligence, the role of intuition and common sense, and the risks of "groupthink" are key issues now being explored by thoughtful commentators.

According to Deidre Macken, of the *Australian Financial Review*, the re-emergence of this topic is emphasised by two recent books that "undermine the authority of experts and, instead, elevate both the wisdom of crowds and the value of a person's gut reaction." Reviewing both, she highlighted the need for diverse points of view to deliver better decision-making.

James Surowiecki, in *The Wisdom of Crowds*, outlines his ambitions to overthrow the standard model of decision-making in the sub-title of the book *Why the Many are Smarter than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies and Nations*. (Macken comments that the length of the sub-title indicates it may have been adjudicated by a crowd).

"The author chronicles how crowds routinely make wiser decisions than experts and supports this by using diverse examples such as the efficiency of Google searches, the accuracy of audiences in *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and the records of public gambling markets," she writes.

"On the surface, the other book, Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink*, would seem to place wisdom in the guts of individuals rather than in the actions of crowds. Subtitled, *The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, his book explores the nature of intuition, or gut reactions, and how these visceral responses are often better than carefully considered, rational conclusions. "Gladwell, too, has a wad of examples to show how we can take small pieces of information and quickly make correct conclusions."

According to Macken, these two theories have more in common than not. At a fundamental level, she says, they argue that in an age of experts, we are ignoring the power of personal intuition and the common sense of crowds. "Both are warnings against 'group think' and the corrosive effect of sur-rendering all decision-making to a narrow band of

leaders (and, often, a narrow-thinking leadership)." She notes that the arrival of these theories and the buzz that is developing around them isn't surprising, given the failure of expert decisions in both companies and government over the past few years.

"The US, in particular, has seen corporate disasters arise in incestuous executive clubs that had no brake on their activities. "The follies that have surrounded the invasion of Iraq, the failure to predict 9/11 and the subsequent ham-fisted handling of anti-terrorist campaigns, have all been sheeted home to 'group think' and a culture that suppresses dissenting opinions. It's also created a cynical public."

Sydney communication consultant and Futures Foundation member, Rodney Gray, also reviewed *The Wisdom of Crowds*, for the professional journal, *Strategic Communication Management*.

"It covers the main types of problems we encounter: cognition, coordination and cooperation problems. Then it outlines the governing conditions for crowds to be wise: diversity, independence, and 'a particular kind of decentralisation'.

"Apart from guarding against 'groupthink', particularly at executive level, it's not easy to see how communication professionals can translate the message of *The Wisdom of Crowds* into organizational action", he wrote. though he added that "there is a clear warning for gung-ho leaders who don't consult broadly.

"For communicators, my first thought was that to get 'many' involved in significant organizational decisions suggests greater use of 'future search' and 'appreciative enquiry' techniques (such as the BBC consultation and involvement efforts in recent years).... there was no mention of such techniques as far as I could see....

"In short, a wonderful, mind-expanding read but don't expect loads of ideas about how to improve communication in your organisation."

There might be more for professional communicators in studies of networks, (see *Future News* September 2004), emergent behaviour in complex adaptive systems and the key role of the underlying values that guide our behaviour.

See also Jan Lee Martin's story in BOSS magazine's "Big Ideas" issue (11 03 05) - now also at www.futuresfoundation.org.au

Signals in the noise....

Human cloning approved

The scientist who created Dolly the sheep has been given the go-ahead to produce cloned human embryos in the search for a cure for motor neurone disease. Cells taken from people with the disease will be used to create the cloned embryos. About 1400 Australians have motor neurone disease, which kills about 500 people a year.

Sydney Morning Herald 10 February 2005

Incubating a global catastrophe

Scientists have issued a blunt warning that the latest bird flu outbreak in Asia threatens to trigger a global pandemic that could kill millions of people. They told an international conference in Vietnam that donors and governments had shown "an alarming lack of commitment" to fighting the deadly virus. The World Health Organisation has warned that action must be taken immediately to prevent the fast mutating virus from spreading around the world.

Weekend Australian 26-27 02 05

Thousands of slaves lose chance of freedom

The Nigerian government has cancelled a ceremony during which at least 7000 men, women and children were to be freed from slavery. According to the BBC News website, a spokesman for the government's human rights commission said the planned ceremony was cancelled (at the last minute) because slavery did not exist in Niger. The government had been a co-sponsor of the planned event. Anti-Slavery International describes appalling conditions of slavery, including babies born into slavery being separated from their mothers at an early age to break family bonds. But these are not the world's last slaves: children are still being born into slavery in neighbouring African countries such as Mauritania, Mali and Chad.

The Guardian, UK 06 03 05

Building foresight abilities in organisations

Recent cycles of boom and bust in global business call for new ways of strategizing, organizing and managing, writes Tom Karp. The central theme has been change - often dramatic change - and to cope with it, leaders in business organizations need new ways of shaping the future of their companies. Traditional concepts in management scholarship and practice are, in this respect, challenged, and new ideas are needed.

Futures Research Quarterly Summer 2004

High schools for futuring

For many years, futurists have influenced progressive school systems through programs like the Future Problem Solving Program (www.fpsp.org), Future Lab Expo (www.futurelabexp.com) and the Institute for Global Futures (www.FutureGuru.com). Maybe now it's time for futurists to help create entire high schools with futures studies at their very core, writes Arthur B. Shostak. He points to other special high schools now opening across the US, including the Bronx High School for Law, Government and Justice, the all-male Urban Assembly Academy for History and Citizenship, and a high school to be run by Amnesty International.

The Futurist

Nov/December 2004

Why you have at least 21 senses

Hearing, sight, sound, smell and touch: is this really the only way we experience the world? Bruce Durie suggests there's a bit more to it. "Close your eyes," he wrote in a story about new research in this area. "Now stretch out your arms. How do you know where they are? Now wiggle your fingers. How do you know they are moving?" While schools still teach Aristotle's idea of five senses, the count is at odds with today's science.

New Scientist

29 January 2005

Hearing flavours

A Swiss musician sees colours when she hears music, and experiences tastes ranging from sour and bitter to low-fat cream and mown grass, astounded scientists say. Neuropsychologists at Zurich University are so intrigued by the case of a 27-year-old professional musician that they have asked her to participate in a year-long study. Apparently she is the world's most extreme known case of synaesthesia, the phenomenon whereby stimulating one sense triggers a response in other sensory organs. The musician sees colours when she hears a tone, with for instance an F sharp creating violet while a C makes her see red, literally.

Agence France-Presse

03 03 05

When journalists spin

In shades of Australia's cash-for-comment scandal, a conservative syndicated US columnist and pundit on several cable TV current affairs shows has been secretly contracted for \$US241,000 by the Bush Administration to promote the President's education policies in his columns and TV appearances, reports Michael Gawenda from Washington. And as the fuss about that died down - the columnist apologised but did not return the cash - it was revealed that other columnists had also received cash from the Administration to promote government policy. A "journalist" using an assumed name has also been the subject of discussion by the Washington press. "...in the context of an American media environment in which the line between independent journalism and commentary and partisan advocacy has become increasingly blurred [these incidents] are disturbing."

Sydney Morning Herald

15 02 05

...more signals in the noise

Growing ill-well divide

About 7000 disadvantaged Australians a year die prematurely because of the growing inequities in health care, a medical specialists organisation says. The Royal Australasian College of Physicians describes the standard of care for poor and indigenous people as "one of the most pressing health problems facing Australia today". Compared with other developed nations, it says, Australia has failed to reduce these inequities. In many cases they are actually worsening. A research report from the University of Adelaide confirms that the health gap between rich and poor Australians has widened over the past decade.

Sydney Morning Herald

7,14 03 05

The sum of the parts

Add the limits of computation to the age of the universe and what do you get? A radical take on the emergence of life, says Paul Davies. Take a bucketful of subatomic particles. Put them together one way and you get a baby. Put them together another way and you'll get a rock. Put them together a third way and you'll get one of the most surprising materials in existence: a high-temperature superconductor. How can such radically different properties emerge from different combinations of the same basic matter? A new factor - from the science of cosmology - could change the debate about emergent behaviour and the known laws of physics.

New Scientist

05 03 05

Selling out

Shouldn't we be pleased that universities are increasingly business minded? Far from it, says Jennifer Washburn. Author of *University, Inc: The corporate corruption of higher education*, she argues that what was once a culture of autonomous research in universities "has morphed in recent decades into something more closely resembling 'University, Inc.'" While she salutes new conflict-of-interest rules that will bar National Institute of Health scientists from moonlighting as consultants, she says the government must now turn its attention to the \$20bn or so in research money it disburses each year to American universities.

New Scientist

12 February 2005

Giving small credit to the world's poor

As three billion people around the world struggle to live on US\$2 a day, the International Year of Microcredit reminds us that the value of a cup of coffee in Australia can change lives in the developing world, reports Peter Graves. He describes the work of Cowbank, a micro-funding project initiated by the Vincent Fairfax Fellows to help combat third world poverty. "Micro-credit lending is a small step for the world's poor and a giant leap for ending hunger and poverty in our world," he said. "It's a credit to the poor who share our world and an opportunity for us to do more to share our wealth."

Living Ethics

Summer 2004

Heart in mouth: disease link found

New research again raises the question of why dental health is so specifically excluded from government health programs. US researchers have found that people with more bacteria in their mouths also have more evidence of heart disease. Their study, which covered 657 people who had no history of stroke or heart attack, showed that people with more bacteria that cause periodontal disease also had thicker carotid arteries - a strong indicator of clogged blood vessels. The results were published in the American Heart Association's journal, *Circulation*.

Sydney Morning Herald

09 02 05

Seven deadly sins get less deadly

A BBC survey that set out to determine whether most people still believe in the "seven deadly sins", identified by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, has found that today the traditional seven of pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust have been replaced by cruelty, adultery, bigotry, dishonesty, hypocrisy, greed and selfishness. Ross Kelly, presenter of the program that commissioned the survey, noted that people seemed to be less concerned with the seven deadly sins and more concerned with actions that hurt others.

The Guardian

07 February 2005

Newsflash: CIA admits no chemical weapons in Iraq

In a formal acknowledgement of the obvious, the CIA has issued a classified report revising its prewar assessments on Iraq and concluding that Baghdad abandoned its chemical weapons programs in 1991, intelligence officials say. The report marks the first time the CIA has officially disavowed its prewar judgments, and is one in a "series" of updated assessments the agency is producing as part of a belated effort to correct its record on Iraq's alleged weapons programs, officials said.

Los Angeles Times

31 January 05