Imagining Difference
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[Comment: Two scenarios for alternative futures. This is the most fun bit of future studies and (unlike this paper) is best done with a group of people. This method involves choosing three emerging trends, looking at the impacts they will have and describing the world you've created. Top stuff.]

Scenario 1

Introduction

This scenario was created using the Hawaii Research Center method of scenario building, and is set in the year 2025. The following three trends were used:

- Robots for simple tasks become widespread
- Continued and increased wealth divide
- Carbon fuels become increasingly expensive

Scenario Description

While worries about the depletion of natural resources have been heard for decades, resources are still available. However, new sources proved expensive and dangerous to access and this resulted in steadily rising costs leading to price increases for fuel and electricity. In a society where the separation between rich and poor has widened, many people cannot afford the energy once taken for granted. Those in the lower end of society who can still afford to run combustion-engined cars (and they certainly can't afford new 'green' cars) must restrict their travel as much as possible. Conserving power has become ingrained among these people and energy-hungry appliances are used sparingly or not at all.

As robots became increasingly prevalent in society many of the poor lost their low-end jobs. Many cleaning tasks, both in- and outdoor, were given over to automated machines which could happily sweep, mop and polish day and night. As people became more accustomed to these robotic helpers many service jobs were automated with the help of voice recognition. Large stores and fast food outlets, for example, managed to drastically cut the number of humans required.

Conversely, for the wealthy life has by and large become more comfortable. While energy costs have been a problem many can afford the higher prices and even switch to alternative premium suppliers (or re-branded branches of existing utility companies) which guarantee none of the occasional outages which plague the traditional sources. Alternatively, many plan ahead for a situation only getting worse by installing solar panels on their houses and improving the energy efficiency of their homes. They can also afford to buy newer, more energy efficient vehicles. Rates of international travel have slowed however as flights become prohibitively expensive to all but the most wealthy.

The very robotic helpers which have caused so many job losses have made life much more comfortable for society's well-off. They can afford a number of helpers and electronic appliances which give them increased leisure time. These servants can maintain the house and garden, look after and educate young children, and provide security. Sending children to private schools is perfectly common, and indicative of the separation between the two strata of society. They are physically separated much of the time, particularly with many poor people unable to afford to travel far from their communities, and frequently forbidden from entering the guarded world of the wealthy. The well-off live in a society where menial tasks are undertaken by machines, and whose homes and communities are protected by robots. The poor see little reason for hope. Uprisings and

grass-roots action are increasingly common with a number of people able to ‘hack’ robots to turn them into destructive forces.

Government is under pressure from both ends of the divide. The poor understandably desire jobs and are requiring a larger and larger welfare outlay. The wealthy however see themselves paying the bulk of the taxes and want more of a return on their money, not to mention increased law and order measures to combat the insurrections from below.

Brainstorm

Robots for simple tasks become widespread
Household cleaning done by robots
Robot street cleaners
Unmanned combine harvesters
Unmanned delivery trucks? Just local?
Robot perimeter guards
Robot child minders/entertainers
Vastly increased use of robots in manufacturing
Robot theme parks
Robot teachers
Robot personal trainers
Anti-robot pressure groups
Robo hacking
Job losses in manufacturing, cleaning, security, delivery - many low end jobs

Increased wealth divide
Increasingly stratified urban landscapes - ghettos and fortresses
Increase in private education and healthcare
Increasing welfare burden
Demands for tax reform from wealthy (they don't want to subsidise what they don't use)
Increasing unrest among the poor

Carbon fuels become increasingly expensive
Car use declines
New cars appear with alternative energy sources
Public transport use increases
More junked cars
Alternative energy sources increasingly used
Dual-track utilities supply
Personal generators
Personal solar/wind power
People more careful about using electrical items
Flights more expensive
Brown-outs
Carbon tax
Usage restrictions
Energy efficient houses constructed

Robots + wealth divide
Only the wealthy can afford the assistance and benefits of robots
Big market for used robots (maybe further ahead, when they’ve been around for years)
Tendency for robot street cleaners etc. not to be sent to poor areas for fear of theft/vandalism.

Wealth divide + expensive fuels
Poor have to watch their energy usage much more
Rich can afford premier utility suppliers that guarantee no outages
Poor can’t afford to travel far
More local shops etc. in poorer neighbourhoods
Stealing power supplies

Expensive fuels + robots
Robots run on solar power, very energy efficient

[Comment: I had a harder time blending these three trends together, and the result doesn't seem to gel as well as the first scenario. Perhaps the communications technology trend is too specific compared to the other, more general and global, trends. Within it I seem to have ended up with conflicting trends of some people wanting their own lands, and others not feeling attached to geography at all. Maybe it's a generational thing.]

Scenario 2

Introduction

This scenario was created using the Hawaii Research Center method of scenario building, and is set in the year 2025. The following three trends were used:

- Increasingly miniaturised and personalised communication devices
- Nations fragmenting into smaller regional areas/cultures
- Global temperatures rise

Scenario Description

Despite the claims of many that global warming would not be a major problem, events seem to have proved them wrong. Industrialised nations were largely unwilling to enforce anything but the weakest measures on pollution, and were definitely unwilling to subsidise environment-friendly development of poorer countries. Population and economic growth has proved disastrous for the environment with climatic effects being felt increasingly over recent years. While unusual weather patterns at the end of the twentieth century could have statistically been a mere blip, it now seems they were a precursor of more unstable weather preceding what seems to be a rise in global temperature. The lowest lands are having increasing troubles with flooding, and many ecologically sensitive wetlands have been wiped out. Fresh water aquifers, already severely depleted in developing countries, have become infiltrated by salt water, rendering them useless. Many crops have failed in warmer countries, with starvation the all-too frequent result, along with lack of income due to the inability to export.

The feeling that governments aren't doing enough to solve the situation (whether there is more they can do or not is irrelevant) has increased the determination of many groups to separate themselves from the nation and go their own way. Many areas around the world are demanding independence (particularly if they have land or water that's so far surviving the climate change), and dispersed ethnic groups demanding their own land. Some of this is peaceful, gradual and democratic with regional pride and culture a positive force. Other factions are taking matters further with the number of small conflicts around the world increasing. Demonstrations are often carried over into other countries, in the hope that more powerful nations and/or international organisations will notice the plight of the self-proclaimed 'homeless' groups. These actions have become more widespread and more elaborate, aided and synchronised by modern communications technology.

This same technology has also lead to another, generally less destructive, form of fragmentation. People can now be in constant communication with anyone else, any other group of people, anywhere in the world. In the developed world it's fairly normal for the younger generation to be constantly communicating with friends whose geographical location is irrelevant, or watching events happening elsewhere. This ease of communication with their self-created groups has led younger people to feel less attached to their national culture and more part of dispersed global culture. Increasing numbers travel from place to place, and from job to job.

The developed world hasn't yet been as badly hit as the rest of the world by global warming and only in recent years have they begun to take concerted effort to curb

pollution. Their minds have perhaps been focused by increasing grass-roots activities by both western activist groups and representatives of the developing nations who are suffering most from global warming. They have proved harder and harder to stop, organising and co-ordinating their dispersed activities with the latest communications equipment.

Brainstorm

Increasingly miniaturised and personalised communication devices
People can always be connected to friends or media
Private satellites become affordable for more groups/wealthy individuals
Increase in spying
Boom in communication-free retreats
No escape from work
Parents always in contact with children
Traffic accidents due to people watching/reading/talking while driving
See live pictures from anywhere instantly
More people roaming, not settling down
More short-term rental properties
Land line phones rarely used
People constantly in touch with different groups to which they belong
Animals fitted with tracking devices
Implanted devices

Nations fragmenting into smaller regional areas/cultures
More border wars
New alliances form
Traditional governments try to cope with reduced power
Increased intolerance of outside groups/ethnicities
Rise of supra-national organisations to mediate disagreements and organise trade
Disagreements over natural resources, rivers, etc.
Boom in arms trade, black market, crime
Increase in regional culture and art

Global temperatures rise
Some low-lying lands lost
Fresh water sources become infiltrated by salt water
Climate becomes gradually more unstable
Crop losses
Warmer countries suffer
Change in migration patterns
Traditionally cooler places become holiday resorts
Water increasingly precious
Green-taxes

Miniaturised communication + national fragmentation
Insurrectionist and terrorist groups able to co-ordinate easier
Regional groups able to communicate with their members around the globe instantly, simultaneously

National fragmentation + temperature rise
Areas want to separate from their more ecologically damaged neighbours

Temperature rise + miniaturised communication
Satellites used to monitor crop growth, good land, water supplies