A Walk in the Future
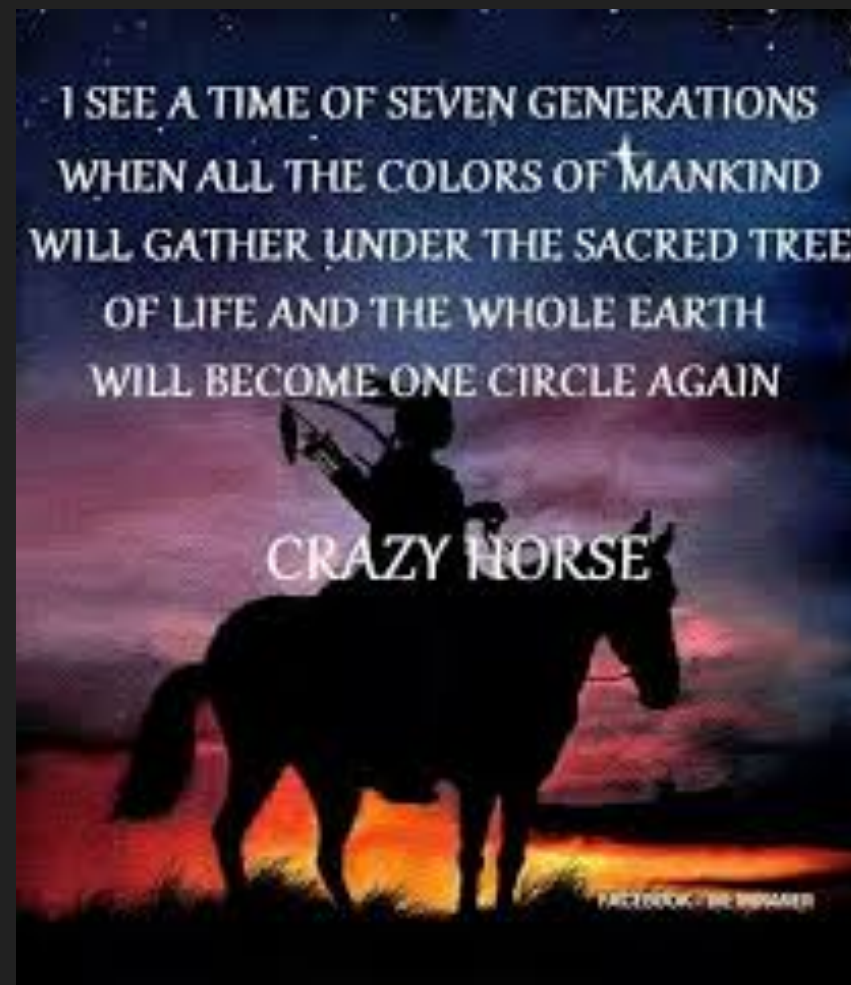
Laura Burney Nissen, Ph.D., LCSW, CADC III

Dean and Professor
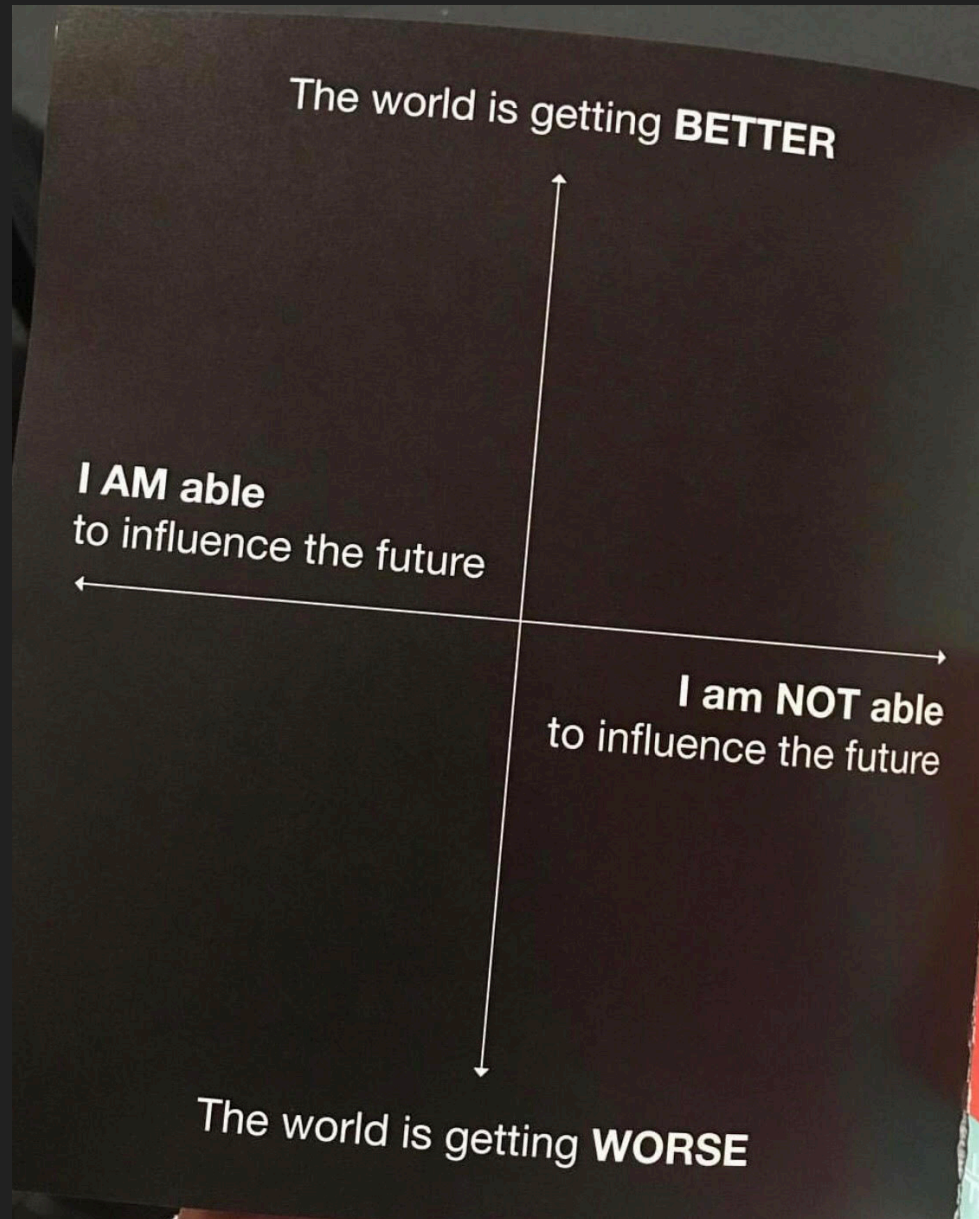
School of Social Work

Portland State University
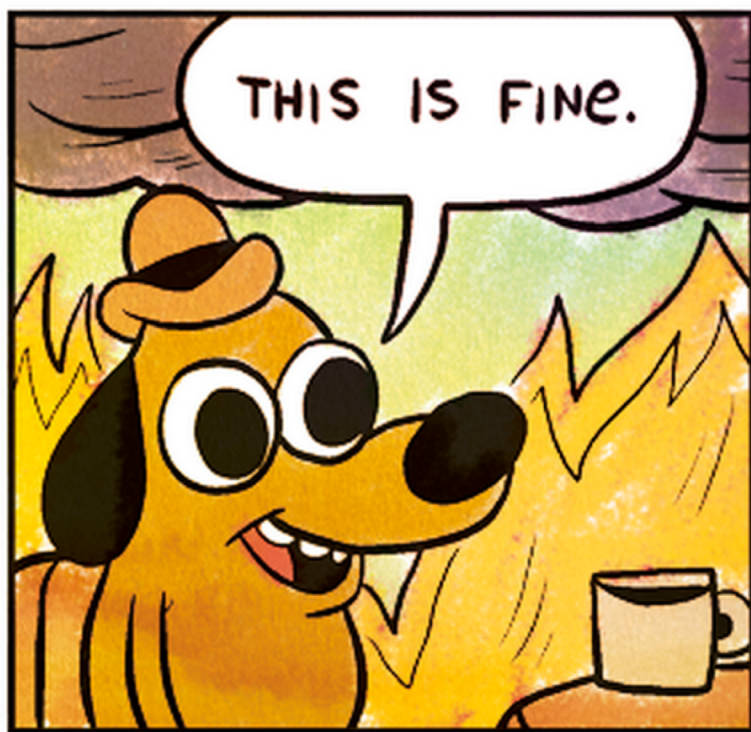
NADD Meeting, November 2018

I SEE A TIME OF SEVEN GENERATIONS WHEN ALL THE COLORS OF MANKIND WILL GATHER UNDER THE SACRED TREE OF LIFE AND THE WHOLE EARTH WILL BECOME ONE CIRCLE AGAIN

CRAZY HORSE

What are the best ways of thinking about the future?

Institute for the Future's 50ᵗʰ Anniversary Conference

TRUST

Hard to build, easy to lose

"Futurists Suck" – Douglas Rushkoff, "Team Human"

○ But FUTURING is about bringing the best of individual and collective creativity, intention, and determination to apply curiosity, community, discipline and hope to questions about what happens next in the world around us.

○ No one is an "expert" in the future. Because no one can know for sure what is going to happen. Practicing futuring skills means applying frameworks to shared problem solving opportunities to both honor the past, acknowledge the present and do our very best to create the most desired future while being courageous enough to know that we must face humanities most vexing challenges. Institute of the Future one place where futuring is the focus – and building futuring capacity in individuals, organizations and communities. I've been a long time fan…due to my work with RWJF and being on the receiving end of a lot of these practices. Now going on a personal/professional journey to deepen my own capacity to contribute in this area.

○ Used in many places – tends to be more widespread in private sector (though not exclusively). Needs to be "vectored" out and adapted to use in the spaces where improved planning is needed on the ground.

Principles of the Future

- The future is plural (many scenarios possible)

- The future is a combination of alternative futures: possible, plausible, probable and preferable

- The future is open (not fixed)

- The future is fuzzy (of course we can't "know" exactly how the future will unfold, and our foresight is imperfect, limited).

- The future is surprising (not always smooth or continuous). Sometimes it arrives in unexpected ways.

- The future is not surprising (sometimes the future is boring).

- The future is fast (the future is always accelerating).

- The future is slow (accelerating change gets all the attention, but a balance of the future is also slow, plodding and predictable).

Principles of the Future (continued)

- The future is archetypical (or generic) – refers to the way that we "think" about the future. Studies in the area tend to reflect four general generic ways of thinking about the future: continue, collapse, discipline and transformation.

- The future is both inbound and outbound. Our personal and organizational futures are shaped by two sets of forces: change that happens to us (from the external world) beyond our control – inbound. Change that we create ourselves – based on our decisions and actions – outbound.

Daniel Bengston (2018). Principles for thinking about the future and foresight education.   World Futures Review, 10(3), 193-202.

Institute of the Future's Work (Just a sample…)

- The future of work
- The future of leadership
- The future of media and communication
- The future of organizations
- The future of various sectors (health, education, energy, tech and others)
- The future of social change
- The future of climate change
- The future of technology
- The future of trust

Three Days at the Conference

- How did we get here? THE SCARY DAY (Day One)

- Where do we go from here? (Day Two)

- Moving forward (Day Three)

Day One: How did we get here?

- Warm up question for our first day: "What do you think the first thing robots will ask humans once they become sentient?"

- Fake news and "post-truth" society – destabilizing forces and current models of reality breaking down – loss of TRUST

- History of computers, tech and internet – successes and failures (emphasis on computational propaganda and "weaponizing" of the internet)

- "VUCA world" – volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity

V U C A

VOLATILITY

Equity, bond and currency market volatility; the lack of stability and predict-ability.

UNCERTAINTY

The potential change in the inflation index calculation, the potential switch to "smoothing" for pension funds calculating their recovery plan; the lack of ability to foresee what major changes might come.

COMPLEXITY

In understanding these financial markets in the era of the "new normal". The proliferation and increasing complexity of new financial instruments and regulation to deal with increasingly complex markets, moving in ways experts have never seen before.

AMBIGUITY

The resulting feeling. Is this the great rotation from bonds to equities? Or will bond yields stay low for longer? What is the best course of action?
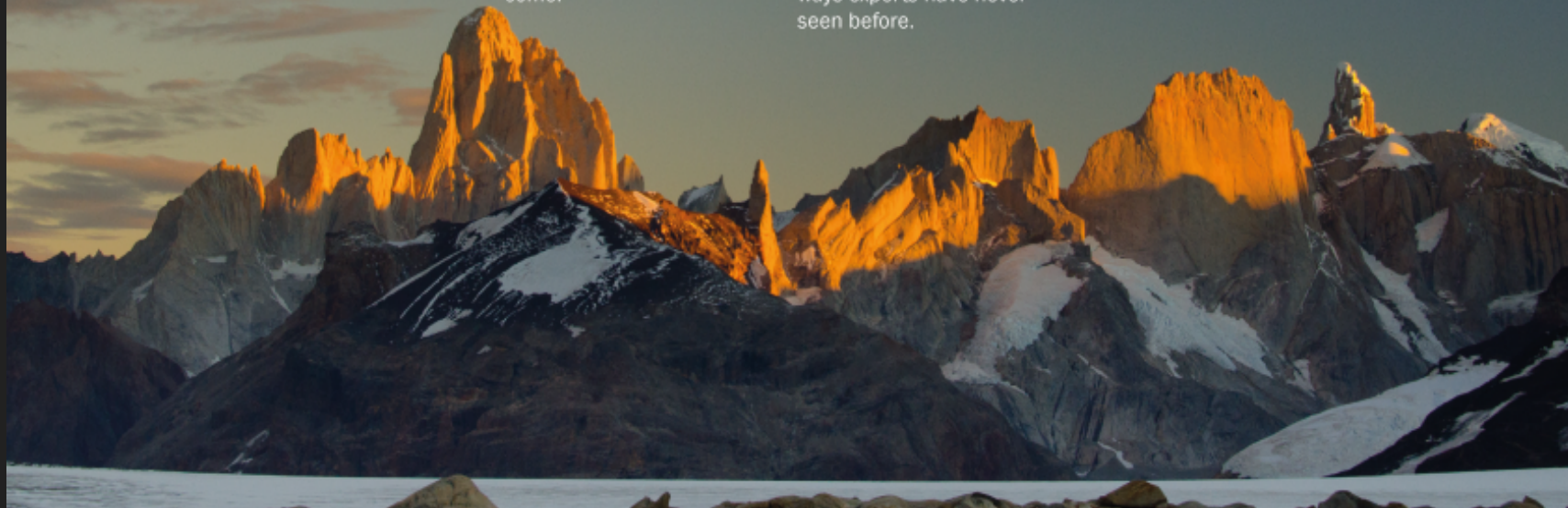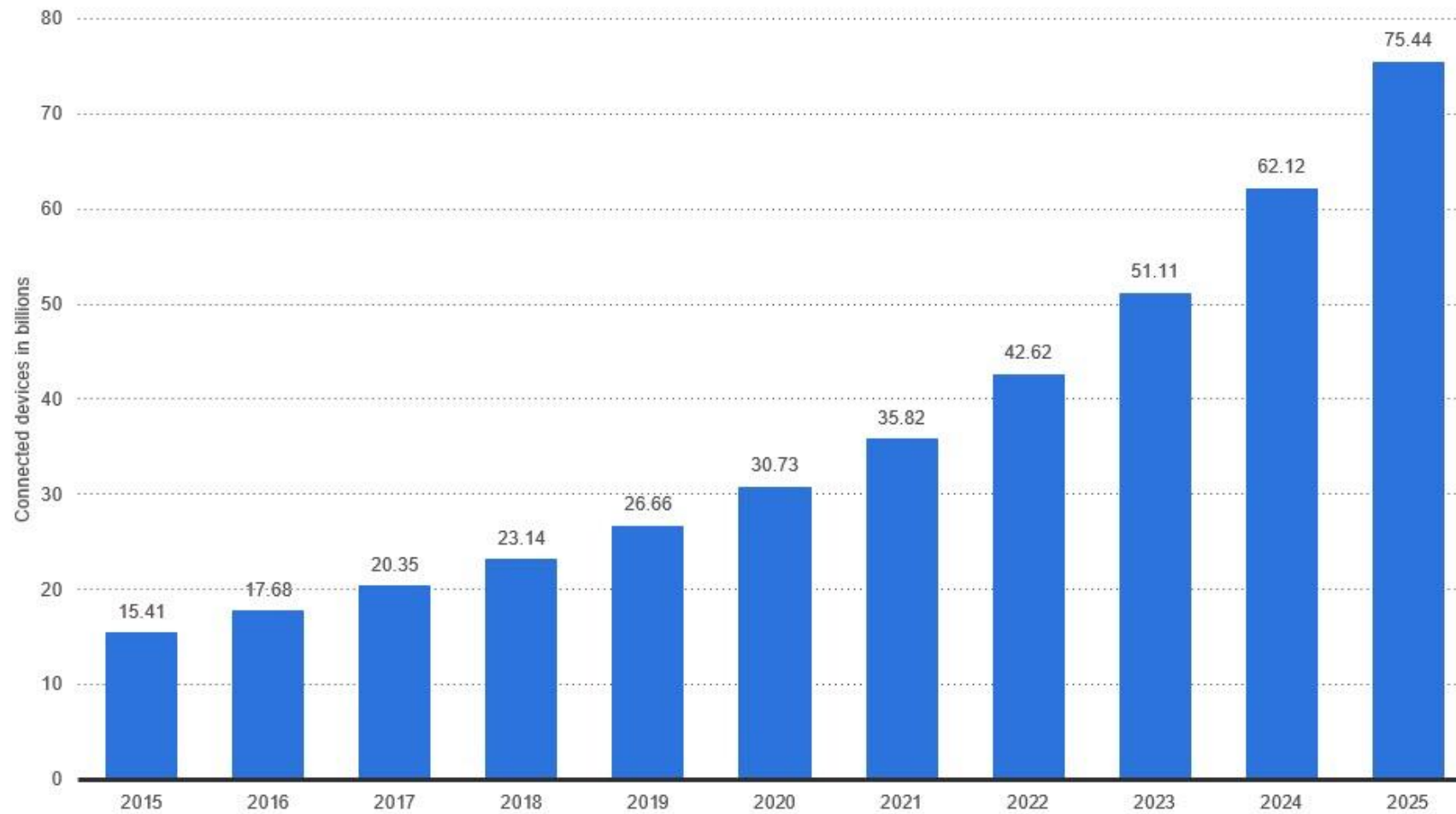
Day One (continued)

- James Cascio, Futurist
- "BANI world" – Brittle (susceptible to sudden and catastrophic failure, non-resilient). Anxious (helplessness, depression). Nonlinear (Seemingly disconnected cause and effect, long lag on cause and effect). Incomprehensible (Doesn't make sense, yet seems to work). (Personal note: strikes me as the grandchild of the "wicked problems" framework.)
- Future shaping forces:

  Shifting authorities and evidence.

  Fragmenting identities and ephemeral communities.

  Competing in extreme economies with extreme disparities

  Manipulating perceptions and persuasion (trust – hard to build, mistrust – more

     common and strangely more resilient)

  Collaborating with non-human actors (growth in the internet of things)

  Blurring of institutional responsibilities and boundaries

  New science revolutions (weather modifications)

Internet of Things - number of connected devices worldwide 2015-2025

Internet of Things (IoT) connected devices installed base worldwide from 2015 to 2025 (in billions)

Day One (continued)

- Remodeling trust toolkit – succeeding in the future means rebuilding trust in whatever sphere we operate in. Trust as the "performance enhancing drug" in the future of work (and society). Exploration of where the biggest breakdowns have been across various sectors.   Information, community, infrastructure, agreements, power relationships?

- Discussion of the NFL as an example – four "trust models" for head injuries futures

- Particularly deep dive in the field of "computational weaponization of the internet."

- What is the "end game" for this declining arc of lost trust in the world around us?

When you try to keep your optimism after everything goes wrong
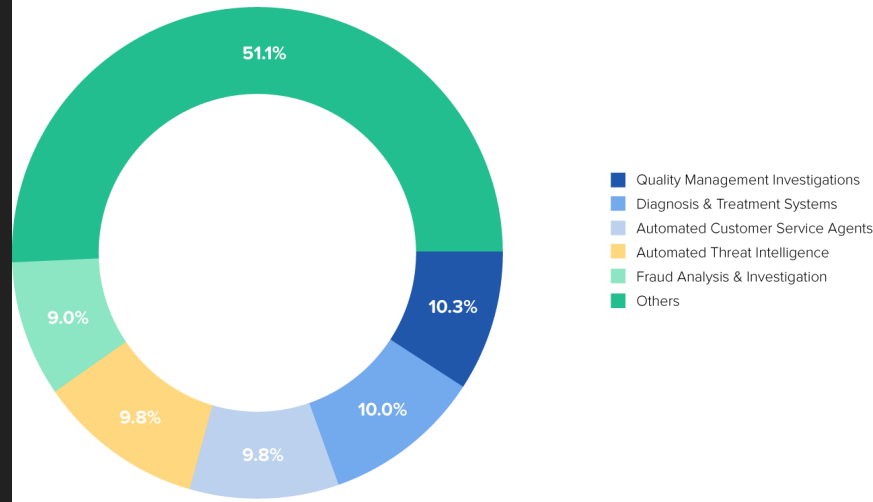
Deep breath...

Day Two – Where do we go from here?

- Navigating virtual worlds and exploring how they work. Guided home for elderly staffed by robots, where family members can watch virtually.

- Big discussion of ethics development for software designers.

- Jane McGonigal – WATCH HER TED TALK about gaming and simulations.

- Universal basic assets as a wave of the future. (Precariat class.)

- The power of mayors and local government.

- The future of organizations.

- Transhumanism (oh it's a thing).

- Young people speaking about their own attitudes about the future.

- Afrofuturism.

Chart 1: Top Use Cases for AI Based on 2017 Market Share

51.1%

10.3%
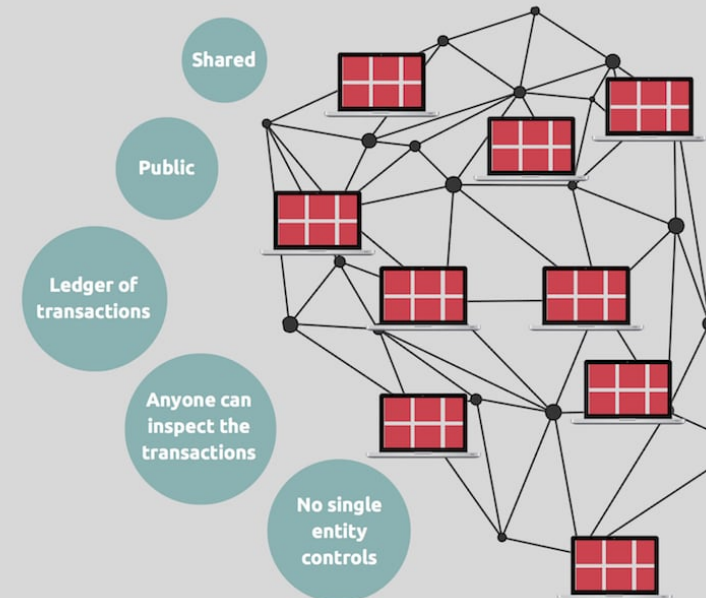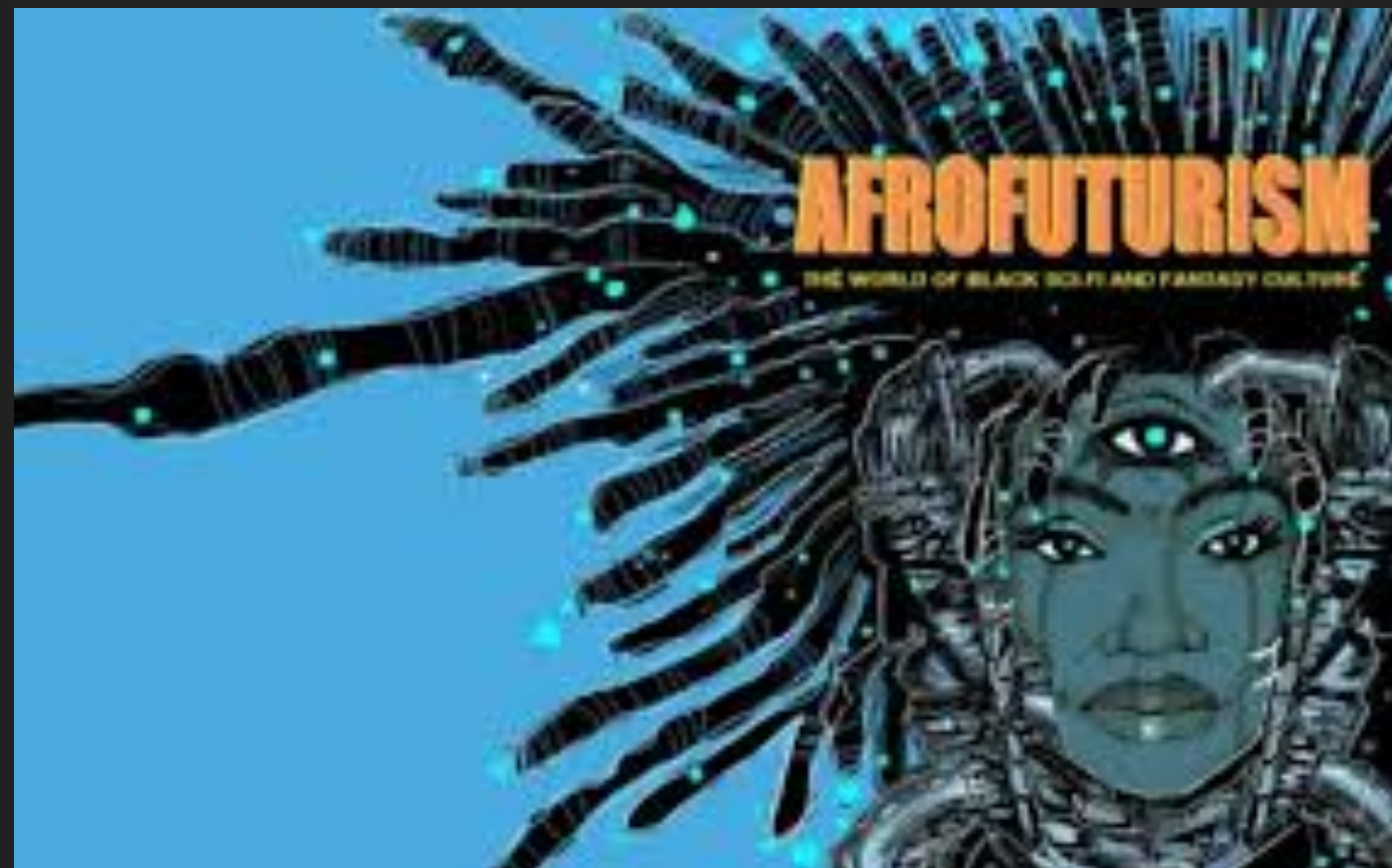
10.0%

9.8%

9.8%

9.0%

Quality Management Investigations
Diagnosis & Treatment Systems
Automated Customer Service Agents
Automated Threat Intelligence
Fraud Analysis & Investigation
Others

Source: IDC

toptal
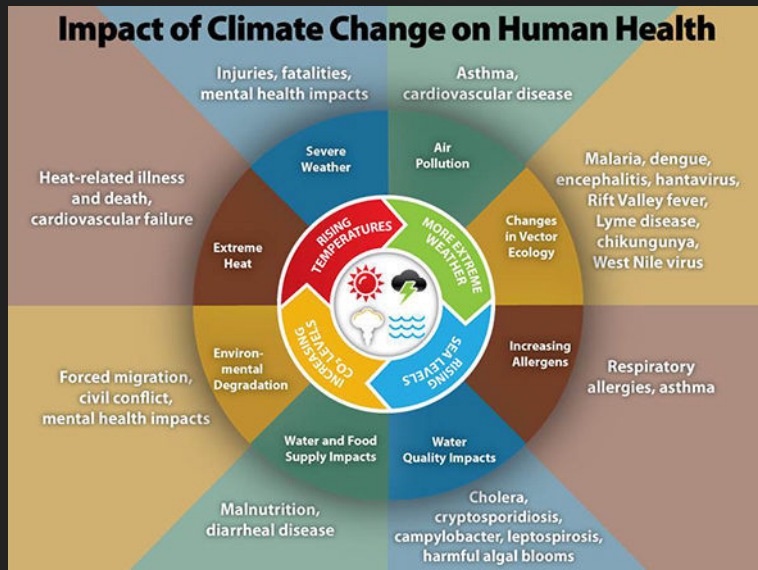
What's a Blockchain?

Like a Spreadsheet in the Sky

Shared

Public

Ledger of transactions

Anyone can inspect the transactions

No single entity controls

Impact of Climate Change on Human Health

Injuries, fatalities, mental health impacts

Asthma, cardiovascular disease

Heat-related illness and death, cardiovascular failure

Severe Weather

Air Pollution

Malaria, dengue, encephalitis, hantavirus, Rift Valley fever, Lyme disease, chikungunya, West Nile virus

RISING TEMPERATURES

MORE EXTREME WEATHER

Extreme Heat

Changes in Vector Ecology

INCREASING CO₂ LEVELS

RISING SEA LEVELS

Increasing Allergens

Respiratory allergies, asthma

Forced migration, civil conflict, mental health impacts

Environ-mental Degradation

Water and Food Supply Impacts

Water Quality Impacts

Malnutrition, diarrheal disease
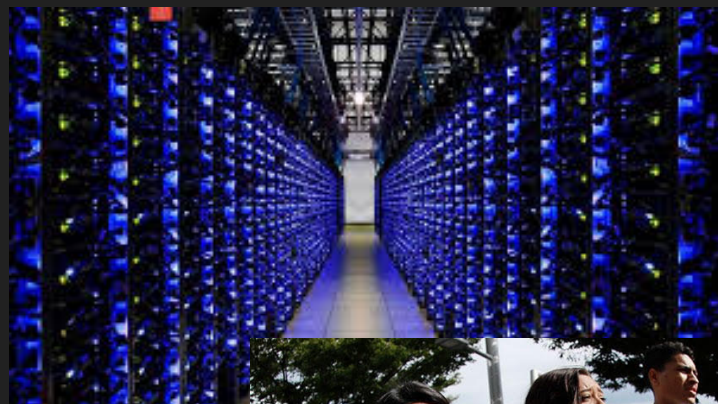
Cholera, cryptosporidiosis, campylobacter, leptospirosis, harmful algal blooms

If you aren't learning about how your work intersects with AI, Blockchain, and Climate Change – you are behind...

AFROFUTURISM

THE WORLD OF BLACK SCI-FI AND FANTASY CULTURE

THIS AIN'T OVER

EVERYONE DESERVES HEALTHCARE

In AMERICA EVERYONE DESERVES HEALTH CARE

FAMILIES HAVE NO BORDERS

THE FUTURE OF GOVERNMENT

Day Three: Moving Forward

- Thomas Friedman – "Thank you for being late: An optimist's guide to thriving in the age of accelerations."

- "At this point in history, its not enough to think outside the box – the future compels us to think without a box."

- "My intellectual software was out of date."

- "The number of people living in a state of deep humiliation is the greatest threat to the future of the world and our shared success than anything else. Humiliation produces rage. Dignity produces equity and peace."

- Bright spots? "Complex adaptive coalitions" – concerned groups of citizens coming together lift their communities up when America's leadership is failing us. It is happening everywhere.

Day Three (continued)

- Rebuilding trust exercise: Identify opportunities to begin remodeling trust in your organizations, communications, and interactions to break through chronic barriers to attention, meaning, collaboration and value.

- The future of social movements – Tarana Burke and #MeToo – rapid accelerations of change and communication (Short version – the future of movements is in the capable hands of women of color.)

- The use of memes as a language of youth

- Profound shift between categorical and spectrum thinking

- Organizational cultures of foresight and futuring.
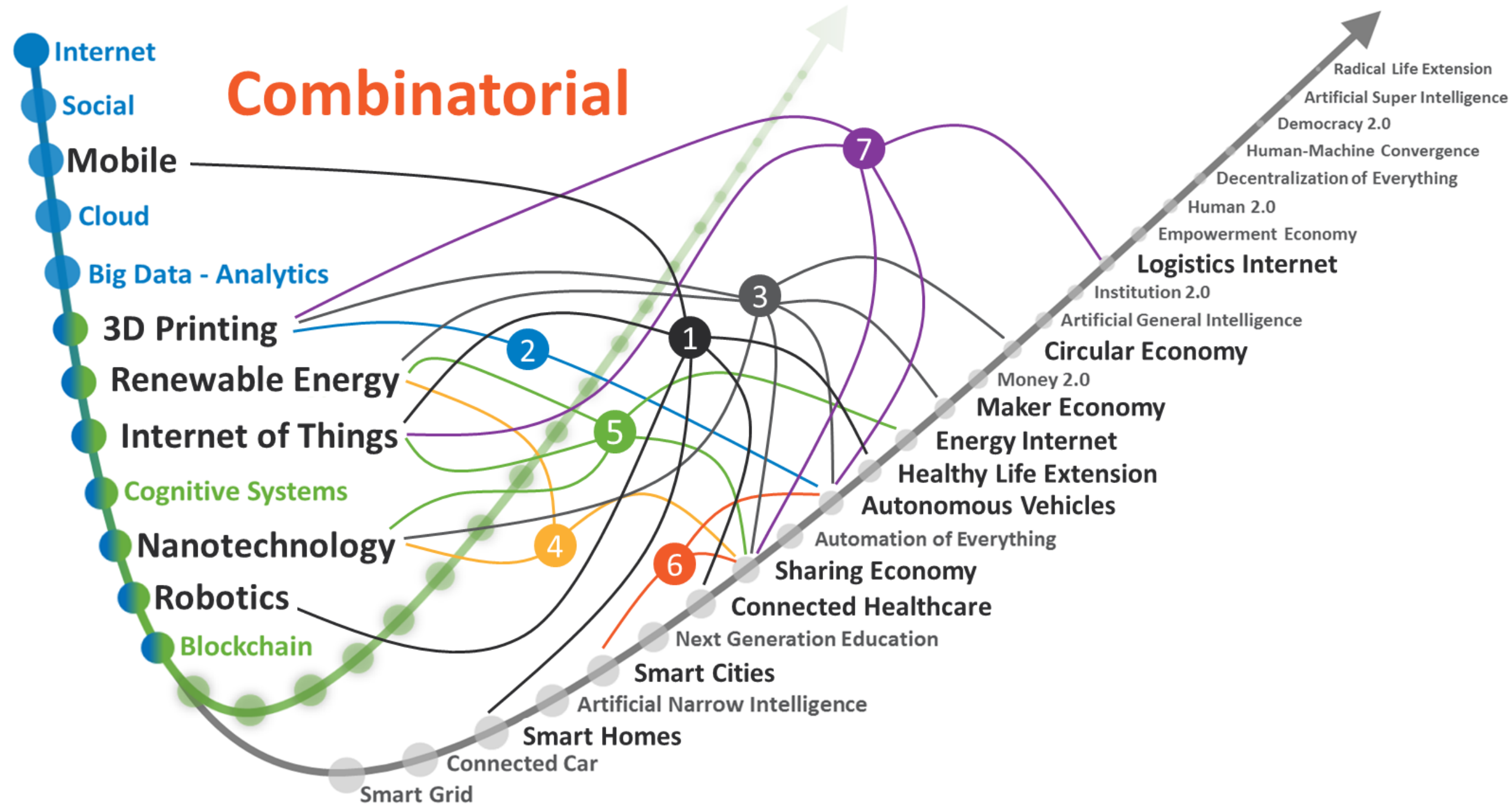
Day Three (continued)

- "Our primary challenge is to prepare our leaders to have a massive, visceral and humbling experience of understanding and preparing for profound disruption."

- Douglas Rushkoff – "Team Human."

- "We embedded many anti-human, anti-creative, anti-progressive elements into today's digital models."

- "Our current lens for technology is that humans are the problem and that technology is the solution. This is a dangerous and destructive force – driven by economic models more than actual need."

- "We have to stop using technology to optimize human beings for the market, and start using technology to optimize human beings for each other and the planet."

- "We have to get 'post-capitalist' faster."

Thoughts about thinking/talking about the future in social work

- Goes places where we are less "expert" (way beyond – though connected to – our particular issue, e.g. child welfare)

- Can be depressing/scary

- We are overwhelmed and busy as it is

- "Incrementalist" tradition, rather than making "leaps"

- Requires humility and a breaking down of boundaries between us and community/other professions

- Spaces for these discussions don't really "live anywhere."

- Trying to get to a place of professional proficiency has limited our imaginations (competency vs. excellence)

- Has enormous potential to energize and engage us and the communities we are part of and/or represent

- We have so much to offer these conversations. Our expertise and commitment to equity, justice, healing, sustainability could be invaluable if we chose to participate as co-thought leaders.

Possible Takeaways for Social Work

- How do we right-size our mental maps of what is going on in the world around us?

- Social change itself is changing – are we participating?

- New kinds/variations of individual, family and community problems and solutions are emerging, conflating, and rearranging – how are we learning?

- We are not present (enough) in the "technology for good" conversations – they are happening most often without us.

- Economic forces are prime to begin "shaping us" for competition and "the marketplace"

- Epistemicide and the voices of Indigenous scholars matters urgently.

- Finding and using our power – optimizing our efforts to be seen and engaged through Grand Challenges but not allowing this platform to limit us. We have to keep thinking bigger – even beyond our "macro" lens.

- Are we "futuring" together in a meaningful way? Kudos to CSWE – we need to go much further and in a consistent way that is appreciative of the complexities in our world.

- The stakes for the "most vulnerable" are extraordinary moving ahead.   The decision makers are not considering them.   Are we doing enough to match this challenge?

Possible Takeaways for Social Work (continued)

- What are our most urgent "profound disruptions?" What are we likely to miss due to our traditions, our vantage points? How do we bring them to one another's attention and move towards integration with our scholarship and practice?

- The debt curve (and related significant reorganization of the higher education sector) is not sustainable...what are we doing about this together? Is this one of the biggest underdiscussed threats to the future of the profession?

- Is our fragmentation of issues (we are sort of everything to everyone) a strength or a challenge to our success in the future? Are we agile (good!) or just exhausted from going so many directions for so long (bad)?

- Where are our "complex adaptive community groups" and are we maximizing their ability to help us thrive in the midst of all the change that is to come?

Possible Takeaways for Social Work (continued)

○ Artificial intelligence, the internet and the future of "helping."

○ Climate change and ongoing US and international suffering and destruction.

○ "Blockchain" (the next wave of the internet) as it impacts our worlds in social work.

Are we ready? Are we contributing? Are we leading? Are we participating?

A few easy steps:

1) Urge/amplify social work scholarship re: the future of "your issue" – in my case the future of addictions studies for example.

2) Build on the "grand challenges" framework by amplifying the "future of" scenarios/explorations for each GC.

3) Develop, advance and implement "futuring" skills as core competencies for every social worker.

I HAVE NO SPECIAL TALENTS. I AM ONLY PASSIONATELY CURIOUS.

-ALBERT EINSTEIN

IMAGINE

Let's invite social workers to help create a future based on our values. But we'll have to agree to become unsettled, become more curious, be committed to discovering not just applying knowledge, skills and values.

Things are getting better and better and worse and worse, faster and faster.

Tom Atlee