



Beam me up, Scotty – for the future of sustainability

John Elkington invokes the spirit of the Starship Enterprise as he tries to focus people on the future



Beam me up, Scotty. John Elkington thinks about the future and a time when world leaders might be programmed to think sustainably. Photograph: Associated Press

I was never a Star Trek fetishist, but one of my favourite bumper stickers of all time has to be: "Beam me up, Scotty. There's no intelligent life here." As politicians struggled to avoid grasping the Euro-nettle, there were times when I would have gladly been beamed up to the Starship Enterprise, to boldly go elsewhere.

In much the same spirit, I tried to channel the future into a couple of top-table discussions late last week – and, in the process, found myself asking a question that I suspect will hover over the rest of my working life.

The first session was a gathering of chief executives at London's Shell Centre to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the International Business Leaders Forum (IBLF). Here I was meant to summarise our Future Quotient work, but I kicked off with an attempt to channel (or beam in) key people from both 1991, when the forum began, and 2031 – when it would be 40.

From 1991, I channelled Ed Woolard, then chief executive of DuPont. At the time, he described himself as the company's chief environmental officer. From 2031, the best I could do was to suggest that the leading edge of the Occupy Wall Street movement signals the sort of questions that

capitalism must answer in the coming decades – if not yet the necessary solutions.

The second session, the following day, was held on the vertiginous 41st floor of the HSBC skyscraper in Canary Wharf, and was organised by Michael Mainelli's endlessly fascinating Long Finance. The event's theme: Bubble Trouble, posed the question whether today's financial bubbles will be followed by bursting bubbles in such areas as clean technology? The sub-title: Pop Goes Sustainability?

As Mainelli put it in an op-ed on the morning of the day of the event: "Bubbles sound lovely – soft bath foam, socialist champagne pétillant – but they are lethal. Real economies make poor decisions that waste people's jobs and lives. If bubbles are froth, then froth sure hurts." Popping, however, comes in multiple forms, including the popping of bubbles (generally undesirable) and the popping of, well, popcorn (generally desirable). We will see both forms of popping in the coming decade – the challenge will be to minimise the damage of the first type and to increase the potential for the second.

One questioner asked the panel whether we couldn't work out better ways to stabilise the global economy? To remove the risk of bubbles? A number of us quickly countered that stabilising a system at a point of chronic unsustainability would be a bad mistake. Bubbles may be a nightmare when they burst, but they are also an inevitable part of the turbulence that goes with the roaring through of the great waves of change that economists such as Nikolai Kondratiev and Joseph Schumpeter studied to such great effect. The question is how to detect them coming, surf them, shape them and ensure that their wild energies are turned to the best social and environmental effect.

As I climbed into the elevator to plummet down the HSBC tower, I recalled a recent conversation with Jochen Zeitz, chairman of Puma. We were discussing ways of channelling the future into the present, of getting the stretch version of the sustainability agenda into discussions where top executives – under increasing financial pressure – are likely to think narrower and shallower, to aim lower and to invest for shorter-term returns. As an almost throwaway line, I suggested that the recent phenomenon of online avatars might be harnessed and adapted to channel the future into the world's boardrooms and C-suites (corporate top dogs).

Then, in the November (US) edition of Wired, I stumbled across a news item which gave that throwaway thought a real shot in the arm. The piece described what is known as the Proteus Effect, the process by which online experiences change our behaviours, both online and – potentially – in the real world. It turns out, according to work done at the Stanford Virtual Human Reaction Lab, that experiences online can trigger behavioural change in such disparate areas as energy efficiency and saving for pensions.

According to Jeremy Bailenson, head of the Lab and author of a fascinating new book, *Infinite Reality*, "Real-world behaviours can be altered by a virtual experience." Take pensions. Most people, the researchers found, "view their future selves as complete strangers". One result is that they are much less willing to save towards future pensions than they would be if they identified strongly with their future selves.

One ruse tried by the Lab has been to age images of experimental subjects by several decades. The piece was illustrated by images of Facebook's 27-year-old Mark Zuckerberg morphing into a 65-year-old. Zuckerberg may not have too much to worry on the pension front, but in one study where this approach was tried the willingness of subjects to put money into a hypothetical pension account jumped by 30%. So persuasive is the evidence that one asset-management company, Allianz, is already planning to offer age-morphed photographs for people, introducing them to their future selves.

In parallel, the Stanford Lab has used avatars to help people understand climate change. Among the challenges here: "the abstract nature of climate change – slow, gradual, and non-linear consequences; gases that cannot be perceived; and the lack of information regarding the impact of specific behaviours". Using virtual simulations, the invisible (for example, carbon molecules) can be made visible and centuries can be made pass by quickly enough for slow, gradual and non-linear consequences to show up clearly.

So here's the thought that I have been playing with. Public health warning: it's no doubt partly spurred by a life-long immersion in science fiction. There are many sci-fi examples of avatar-like relationships between decision-makers and rather unusual advisers. Think of Captain Kirk's relationship with Spock in Star Trek. Or of Buck Rogers in the 1980s TV series, accompanied by his little robot Twiki, bearing the computerised Dr Theopolis around his gyro-assisted neck.

Surely it isn't beyond the human species to come up with a universally accessible system that channels timely, actionable ecological wisdom to decision-makers through a trusted, personalised device? Sustainability's version of Jeeves. Or the top table's version of the "choice-editing" that supermarkets now do for consumers. But here we would be aiming for tomorrow's Camerons, Sarkozys, Merkels, Obamas, Singhs and Wens. (Plus the global C-suite and, critically, the world's stock markets and the financial institutions that manage our money, including our pensions.) We must hope that the ability to personalise technology for truly intelligent life forms outlives the passing of Steve Jobs.

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