

# Guest editorial

Jonathan Calof and Peter Bishop

There have been a plethora of articles written about foresight and foresight-related activity at a country level. For example, in 2017, *Foresight* had two special issues devoted to foresight in Russia. Much has been written about foresight in Japan (for example, [Urashima et al., 2012](#)), in the UK (for example, Keenan and Miles, 2009; [Georghiou et al., 2009](#)) and elsewhere. Yet, little formal research has surfaced on foresight activity and scholarship in North America. This special issue of *Foresight* changes that by presenting a number of insightful articles and case studies on foresight and foresight-related research and practice in North America.

We should all have some idea of what foresight is. After all, it is the name of this journal. But what is meant by “foresight-related”? It means that North American researchers have also explored the complementary nature of foresight in relation to other fields of endeavor. For example, Calof, Richards and [Smith \(2015\)](#) wrote about how foresight complemented analytics and competitive intelligence. In the *Foresight* journal itself, several articles have named the following fields as complementary to foresight:

- Futures studies ([Bishop, 2001](#));
- Anticipatory systems (the topic of a 2010 special issue);
- Technical intelligence (Safdari Ranjbar and [Tavakoli, 2015](#)); and
- Competitive intelligence ([Calof, 2017](#)).

The European Foresight Platform, an EU initiative, defines foresight as “a systematic, participatory, future-intelligence-gathering and medium-to-long-term vision-building process aimed at enabling present-day decisions and mobilizing joint actions.”

The fact that forward-looking, analytical, participative and integrative methodologies are these days helping with decisions in the fields of competitive intelligence and technical intelligence, underlies their anticipatory nature. Looking ahead is likewise a feature of new fields such as collective intelligence, crowd source intelligence and environmental scanning, as well as concepts such as “corporate radar” and peripheral vision. Are these distinctive and complementary fields and concepts the result of foresight? Or are they actually sub-domains of foresight or systems theory?

[Louie \(2010\)](#) posits that anticipatory systems theory “provides the conceptual basis for foresight studies” (p. 18). This would suggest that such a theory forms part of foresight studies. [Poli \(2010\)](#) explores the many different aspects of anticipatory systems in relation to studies in psychology, biology, philosophy, physics, social sciences, semiotics, engineering, artificial intelligence, brain studies and futures studies. This paper points to anticipatory systems having multiple sensing systems, which would suggest that foresight, competitive intelligence and other fields could be considered parts of an anticipatory system. This is very similar to a study by Calof, Arcos and [Sewdass \(2017\)](#) who found that many of the organizations included in their study had multiple anticipatory units in their organizational structure. For example, some firms had a competitive intelligence unit, a market insight unit and a foresight unit reporting to the same executive. This approach puts the concept of an anticipatory system at the center, with the other domains

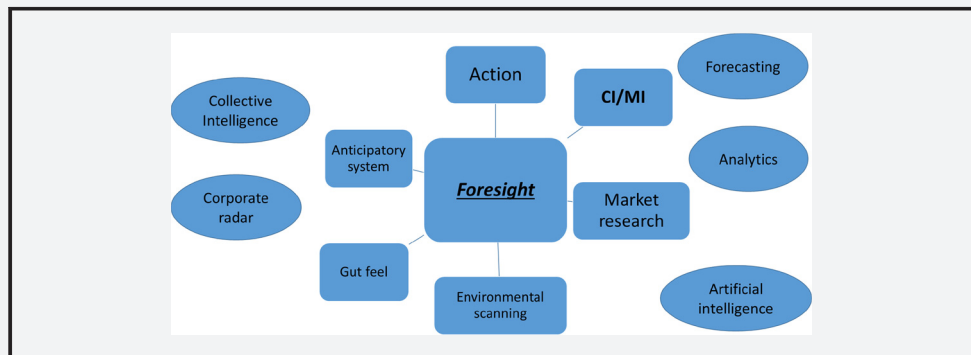
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(such as foresight and competitive intelligence) being part of that system. Whether foresight is at the center of the system (Figure 1) or anticipatory systems are at the center (Figure 2), or whether all the components in the figures are linked, this special issue stayed away from the intricacies of such a debate by asking in the call for both foresight and foresight-related papers. Therefore, for the remainder of this paper, the term foresight will encompass both foresight and foresight-related issues (Figures 1 and 2).

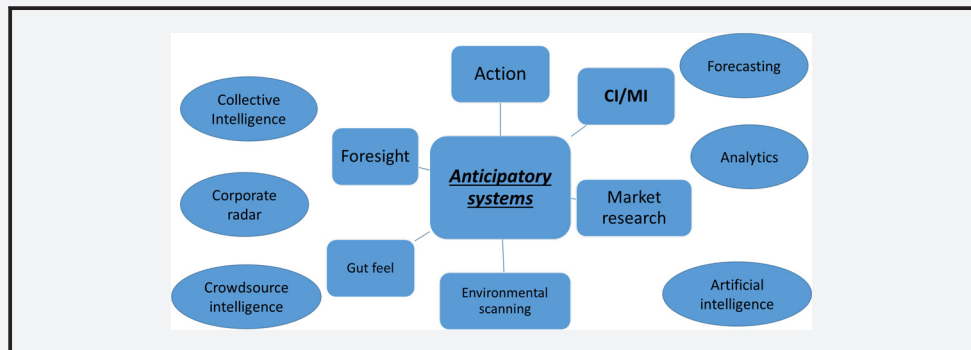
In proposing this special issue, it was the coeditors' belief that there is significant foresight activity in North America. Using the foresight ecosystem concept developed by Kühn *et al.* (2020), the coeditors are able to point to several different elements of this ecosystem, with some elements growing noticeably. For example, membership of foresight-related professional associations is on the rise. A testimony of this is that, since it was founded in 2002, the Association of Professional Futurists has seen its North American membership base grow to 240. Similarly, the North American membership of the Special Librarians Association's competitive intelligence division has been growing, whereas Strategic and Competitive Intelligence Professionals has been focusing increasingly on foresight (Calof, 2020). There have also been increasing numbers of professional foresight courses offered. For example, the Conference Board of Canada has conducted seminars for over 300 participants in the past six years.

One of the articles in this special issue authored by Wilner and Roy notes how the foresight ecosystem has been expanding across the government of Canada, which the two guest editors had noted from their own consulting work. The guest editors have also been witnessing the growth in university courses and programs in foresight in Canada, such as Carleton's foresight program and the Ontario College of Art and Design Universities Strategic Foresight and Innovation Master's program, whose graduates often join Canadian firms' foresight units.

**Figure 1** Foresight as the central controller of an anticipation system



**Figure 2** Anticipatory systems as the central controller in the system



From an academic/research perspective, the fact that there were enough high-quality articles for two special issues suggests that quite a lot is happening on the foresight academic/research front. This guest editorial addresses both of these special issues.

Although there are clear signs of foresight activity and increased momentum in the North American foresight ecosystem, there is no benchmark for making comparisons with the countries mentioned in the introduction (Russia, UK and Japan). Perhaps future research will look into this.

The kinds of foresight research being conducted in North America can be seen through the 12 articles making up the two special issues. Readers will get a sense of the breadth of what is happening in North American foresight although they will be given only a snapshot of some of the leading topics in the field, including methodological approaches in North American foresight. The articles making up this special issue blend theory (2) with a selection of qualitative (7) and quantitative (3) studies.

On the theoretical side, Clardy wrote on the ontology of the future, whereas Kahan spoke about futures studies as a metadiscipline.

The three quantitative articles used a mixture of mathematical techniques to arrive at their conclusions:

- Bairagi and Durand-Morat performed a cost/benefit analysis relating to the establishment of an agricultural research center in Haiti (It should).
- Calof conducted a correlational study on whether firm size is associated with the use of competitive intelligence (It is not).
- Drakes *et al.* conducted an econometric study on the alternative futures for a Caribbean nation (Some good; some not so).

Most of the qualitative articles were about the foresight field:

- Two articles proposed practical frameworks: Freyn and Farley for competitive intelligence in health care and Hines for scenario forecasting.
- Three provided examples of foresight in action: Fleener and Barcinas on futurists' descriptions of the field, Fletcher on visioning projects in two American cities and Wilner and Roy on the evolution of foresight in the Canadian Government.

Finally, two of the qualitative articles offered scenarios of the future itself:

1. Bishop *et al.* on the future of cancer research for a Canadian research organization
2. Klakurka and Irwin on the future of higher education using a case study of recent experiences at a Canadian university.

Several of the papers provide examples of applied foresight, which is showing how foresight can be used to provide organizations with strategic recommendations. For example, Bishop *et al.* concluded by saying:

The findings from this strategic foresight exercise are having a significant influence in the Ontario Institutes for Cancer Research's (OICR) strategic planning for the future and the shape of its current and emerging priorities.

The articles in this special issue also demonstrate the value of diversity in the research team and recommend a very integrative and collective approach to foresight studies in North America. In this regard, contributors to this special issue were academics, foresight service providers (consultants), practitioners (foresight unit heads) and executives who receive foresight reports. The Wilner and Roy article is an excellent example of author diversity. Professor Wilner teaches foresight at Carleton University, provides foresight training to various clients and was a practitioner in the federal

government of Canada, whereas his coauthor, Martin Roy, heads the foresight unit at Global Affairs Canada. Similarly, the article by Bishop *et al.* brings together a foresight academic and practitioner and senior executives from the OICR.

Diversity is also evident in the range of fields represented by the different contributors to this issue, including foresight, future studies and competitive intelligence. There is also a wide geographical spread in terms of the submissions: from the USA and Canada, to Haiti and Barbados. We received a proposal from Mexico as well.

Given the range and diversity of the various studies undertaken, it would be impossible to draw any overall conclusions from them. It is, though, heartening to see that foresight appears to be going from strength to strength in North America.

What can be inferred from the papers in this special issue? North American foresight research and teaching are alive and well, broad, diverse, inclusive and collective. The intelligence specialists who are helping organizations anticipate market dynamics and understand where technology is going, who the right customer is, what the competitors are going to do next and what policies will emerge, are active in North America. So, too, are those who are anticipating fast-emerging environments and then linking this anticipation to strategic decisions, policies or programs.

This special issue shows that North American research is not only theoretically sound but it is also empirically bold, thus paving the way for the development and application of new forms of foresight theory in various organizational settings.

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## Further reading

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