

BEN WHITELAW

So no one knows which business model will emerge as the one that makes journalism sustainable.

But what if there was someone whose job it was to do just that? Someone who was tasked with projecting twenty or thirty years into the future to think about the dominant trends that will define our society and journalism as an industry. A futurist, for example.

A futurist, [according to the Association of Professional Futurists](#), is someone who looks at broad social changes and prepares for change and opportunities. Importantly, they don't just predict what will happen but will say how or why a future could appear.

I was at an Economist conference called [the Big Rethink](#) last week at which Anne Lise Kjaer, a leading global futurist, spoke very broadly about the move to meaningful consumption and how what we read and do is increasingly linked to improving the quality of our life.

She outlined the four Ps that brands need to be more conscious of (people, planet, pleasure and then profit) and warned that not doing so might mean that your brand becomes part of the 70% that people would not care about should it not exist. [Anna also spoke at length about some of the current trends developing at the moment and the typologies which people fit into, which was very interesting.](#) And throughout her talk, it struck me that, in any business in flux as much as journalism, a futurist might be useful.

But then I spoke to a fellow attendee, a brand marketing director from a leading magazine company, who was sceptical about the value of a futurist within a media organisation. 'Everyone's a futurist', he said. 'This kind of thinking is going on all the time already'. He referenced the BBC's iPlayer, which foresaw the demand in online streaming first on web and now on mobile platforms, and made a very good point about how every magazine ever released came about because consumer research suggested there was a gap in the market that could be exploited. At News International, it dawned on me, we have an R&D department which produces innovative cross title prototypes that can be used across the business. All of them are futurists of sorts, just without the name.

However, the people involved in each of these projects inevitably have to deal with daily problems, face issues with existing systems, field people demanding their time,

essentially juggle obstacles that get in the way of them of projecting into the future. At which point, you have to ask, who is thinking about the trends upon which the business model that will facilitate good journalism in the future hangs?

In that sense, the idea that media organisations might employ a futurist to spot trends is still compelling to me. I don't think it will necessarily happen very soon (and those people will almost certainly not be called futurists if so) but it feels right and makes sense (to quote an ice hockey legend) to invest more money and time into where the puck is going to be, not just where it is going (quote via [@PeterMacrobert](#)).