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F212.org Online Platform: Imagining the Future through Social Media as a Tool for Social Innovation

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Purpose

F212.org is a virtual think tank of university students interested in sharing ideas on how to face main future challenges. This platform was designed and developed as part of a pilot project coordinated by FUTURLAB– The Laboratory of Foresight at the University of Alicante, and funded by FECYT– Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology. This brief describes the results of a comparative study about the images of the future found among young students from Haaga Helia University of Applied Science (Finland) Tamkang University (Taiwan); and University of Alicante (Spain). The importance of this project lies in the assumption that both the communication and the exchange of information about images of the future through social networks will empower new generations to face the challenge of building a desired future.

The Study of Images of the Future

The studies focused on images of the future date back to the second half of the twentieth century and have their origins in the fields of sociology and psychology. After the growing interest in this area which arose during the early 1990s, the study about images of the future –and more specifically about images of the future among young people– has consolidated within the framework of social sciences in general and, particularly, in the context of Sociology during the late 1990s and the first years of the twenty-first century.

According to Polak's definition, "an image of the future is made of associated memories and expectations. It is a set of long-range goals which stress the infinite possibilities open to a person. Thus, an image of the future can be defined as a mental construction dealing with possible states. It is composed of a mixture of conceptions, beliefs, and desires, as well as observations and knowledge about the present. This affects a person's choice both consciously and unconsciously and is derived from both reality and from imagination. It ultimately steers one's decision-making and actions". Therefore, the reflection about the expected impact of these images on the determination of our present actions and our attitude towards the future allows us to see the need for a systematic approach to study such images.

Nevertheless, the research into such images carried out during last century tended to be relatively sporadic and never had a predominant role in the context of futures research. As far as Sociology in particular is concerned, many works which attempt to identify and explain the concerns most commonly found among this population segment basically seek to answer the following question: *how do young people expect their future to be?*

However, it is far from easy to find studies where the approach consists in trying to find an answer to the question: *what do young people want for their future?* Therefore, there is arguably a lack of new approaches which can integrate aspirational parameters and enable a greater involvement of youths in the process of defining alternatives for the future.

For this reason, public and private institutions are now apparently taking a greater interest in identifying and understanding citizens' expectations and wishes, which has led them to promote actions in line with the new paradigms of *Social Innovation* and *Open Innovation* that provide a more active, direct and continuous citizenship in governance, close to the concept of participatory democracy. In fact, this is something which currently seems much more feasible than not so long ago thanks to aspects such as technology development, the spreading of internet access and the increasingly high popularity of social online networks.

Therefore it is perfectly feasible to complement the descriptive approach to a 'diagnosis of the future' with images of the future and creative proposals directly defined and developed by young people, giving voice and prominence to them thanks to:

1) the proliferation of communication channels that allow for immediate and continuous feedback (2.0 platforms, social networks) with the user/citizen; and

2) the development of 'participatory' foresight methodologies in both institutional and private sectors.

The conceptual basis behind this approach leads participants to consider themselves as key actors in the task of defining their own future –through an active participation in the construction of shared images of the future. It could consequently prove much more motivating for young people to interact within these processes if participants are given some space to share and create.

Tool Set for the Future

The project presented here is based on a previous study (Guillo, 2013) which involved a total of 56 university students from the Haaga Helia University of Applied Science (Helsinki, Finland) and the University of Alicante (Alicante, Spain).

Based on the overall results and on the feedback provided not only by participants but also by the students and teachers involved, it was possible to highlight the following 4 points with the aim of achieving an improvement in subsequent studies:

- Hard-to-understand / answer questionnaires: the students found the process hard to complete (too many categories and questions) and sometimes even confusing.
- Lack of interaction: the platform suffered from a lack of technological tools, which always make it easier for users to interact with one another.
- Overlap between groups: the selected categories proved useful to organise the responses to some extent but participants found numerous overlaps between the topics discussed in every category.
- Hard to analyse: the scenario format gave us (as researchers) very valuable material to analyse. Nevertheless, a more precise way to express expectations, fears and wishes about the future is badly needed to improve interaction.

Taking into account the 4 points mentioned above, a new study was designed which included three significant changes with respect to the previous one, all of them oriented to improve users' experience within www.f212.org:

- **Removing the division into categories**: the categories from the previous study (economy, culture, politics, ecosystem, security) were abandoned in order to build an easy-to-complete questionnaire. Since the information-collecting tool was going to be an online survey (embedded in the platform), it became essential to provide a short, clear and quick-to-answer questionnaire.

- **Changing narrative scenarios by keywords**: In this case, the change also had to do with the difficulty found by participants when completing the process. Therefore, a decision was made to replace the initial idea of describing a future scenario (150 words) with the choice of keywords to describe their future scenario (10 words). This would additionally allow us not only to process participants' responses much faster –almost in real time– but also to update the tag clouds inserted in the platform, which could largely improve the level of interaction within the platform too.

- **Using a clearer language**: the feedback received from the previous study led us to modify the instructions given for the completion of the different questionnaires – using a more straightforward language. Various levels of information were offered, including more detailed information (tutorials and FAQs) in case users needed a higher degree of detail.

Thus, the design of our new study started by restructuring the platform in the following sections:

1. *RATINGS - Feelings about the future in 2030*
   Participants were asked the question "*are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future?*" in this section. This allowed them to position themselves in terms of pessimism/optimism, on a scale from 10 (totally optimistic) to 0 (totally pessimistic). Three different dimensions were taking into account: *World* (global level), *Country* (national level) and *Myself* (personal level).

2. *FORECASTS – Probable future in 10 words.*
   Participants had to write a maximum of 10 words about the main features which, in their opinion, *will* characterise the world in 2030.

3. *SKILLS - Self-evaluate your references about the future in 2030.*

The *ratings* and *forecasts* given by participants were subjected to self-evaluation through these three questions (to be answered on a scale from 0, the worst, to 10, the best):

– Are you concerned about the future?
– To what extent are you prepared to face the future?
– What is your level of knowledge about global change processes?

Participants were additionally asked to complement their self-evaluations by naming some of the sources (books, webpages, magazines, journals, etc.) that they usually consult and on which their visions of the future are based.

4. *WISHES – Future you want in 10 words.*
In this section, participants had to write a maximum of 10 words about the main features that, in their opinion, *should* characterise the world in 2030.

5. *IDEAS – Open Discussions.*
This section was included as a meeting place to share creative ideas on how to face future challenges.

A total of 378 university students (between 20 and 32 years old) took part in this study by accessing the open platform.

Images of the Future of Spanish, Taiwanese and Finnish Students

RATINGS - How do you feel about the future in 2030?

A remarkable difference exists in the images of the future found at a national level among the participants from Spain (median 4), Taiwan (6) and Finland (7). In the case of Spain, the differences become even more evident when comparing the three levels considered: global (7), national (4) and personal (7). However, such results should actually "come as no surprise" within the current context of social and economic crisis in Spain, which also shows a high degree of inconsistency as far as images of the future are concerned. Another interesting finding is the widespread high degree of optimism with regard to the personal level (7).

FORECASTS – The probable future in 10 words: Females show more optimism

Seeking to make the platform as interactive as possible, tag clouds were generated with the participants' responses in this section. These tag clouds - including the 50 words with the highest repetition frequency among respondents- were available online, and a allowed us to draw some general conclusions:

− *High consensus on the key factors that define the probable future by 2030.* The words which show a higher repetition frequency were technology, globalisation, competitiveness, artificial, connected, energy, ecology and war. These words can be regarded as part of the main speech about the future, presented in the general, mass media as part of a globally shared image of the probable future.

− *Females show more optimism than males.* A marked difference could be perceived in the degree of optimism shown by females and males among participants from Spain and Taiwan (and also among those from Finland, though to a lesser extent). That is why participants from Spain and Taiwan show a higher repetition

frequency in words such as opportunities, hope and ecology.

SKILLS - Self-evaluate your references about the future in 2030_ Homogeneous use of TV as information source

The results in this section show a high level of preparation and knowledge, along with a lack of diversity in the sources considered (mainly TV and general-information newspapers). On the whole, participants from Spain, Taiwan and Finland see themselves as 'experts' in the topics under discussion: the median is 5 or higher in every case. Nevertheless, when asked about the kind of sources that they usually resort to, only a few of them mention access to specialised journals, reports, databases, etc. Information availability also helps us understand the aforementioned conclusion about the globally shared image of the probable future.

One important finding when comparing across countries is that participants from Finland showed the worst self-evaluations, a point below self-evaluations of participants from Spain. These results contrast with the overall Education results observed in both countries during the last years.

WISHES – The future you want in 10 words: Different perceptions on 'Love' and 'Community'

− *Significant differences regarding how they describe their probable* futures. Words like technology, global and connected, which had a strong weight in Forecasts, are now losing repetition frequency. This can be interpreted as reflecting an attitude of rejection towards today's 'hyper-connected' world (a shared vision for the probable future). On the contrary, words like opportunities or work have a stronger weight in these desired futures, which can be explained by young people's professional aspirations.

− *A lack of specific, creative terms to describe the desired future.* On the whole, no breaking ideas are found in the words given by the students. Thus, the most often repeated words within this section are equality, peace,

respect, ecology or freedom, which, in our opinion, form part of what can be described as a utopian and very broad vision about the society of the future. This lack of specific and breaking ideas can also be related to the fact that young people find it hard to visualise all the possibilities ahead of them.

− *Few differences between males and females.* The biggest visible difference between males and females refers to the word love (whereas no males mention this word as part of their desired future, it stands out as one of the words with the most weight among females).

− *Few differences between countries.* The most interesting finding in this respect is the word communal, only present among Finnish respondents. In the cases of Spain and Taiwan, despite the appearance of words such as equality or peace –which clearly suggest an idea of cooperation with one another in their meaning– the complete absence of this specific word seems very meaningful to us, and could be interpreted as a weak signal regarding social life in the countries represented.

Online Participatory Foresight Processes

The comparison between the results obtained in this study and those from the previous experience (Guillo, 2013) leads us to highlight the findings below:

- *Simplicity encourages participation.* A decision was made to remove the division into categories in our study this time, which made it easier and faster for respondents to complete the whole process. This resulted in a much higher participation: 378 respondents (as opposed to 56 in the previous study).

- *More interaction means enriching our own images of the future.* Respondents consider the possibility of exchanging ideas about the future with young people who have different cultural backgrounds very interesting. Thus, the international connection with other students from different parts of the worlds was seen as an extremely positive factor. Moreover, the integration of the section *Ideas* makes it possible for them to directly interact with other correspondents, which was also highlighted as a very positive point (more than 300 replies were registered in the open discussions started in this section).

- *Motivation is a key point.* Two different mechanisms were designed for the purpose of involving people in the platform. One of them was the development of future workshops, where students received explanations on the basics of futures thinking and were encouraged to participate in the process. The other mechanism was the creation of a brief presentation, available on the platform and easy to use for e-mail communications. In this sense, a higher degree of participation was found among the students who took part in futures workshops and were personally motivated to sign up for the platform.

- *A more straightforward language and better design elements help understand large amounts of data.* Technologically speaking, tag clouds were the best way available for us to show the results from *Forecasts* and *Wishes* to respondents. These graphs allowed users to have a slight –but also very clear– idea about the image of the future generally shown by respondents. The same approach was applied to other aspects of the platform, such as the design of the slide presentation and the presentation dossier or the instructions contained in every section of the platform, among other things.

As a general conclusion, it could be stated that improving interaction tools, designing better communication elements and opening the platform to an international university-student context have all had a strong positive impact on this study. Thus, the results collected in www.f212.org helped us achieve a better understanding of the mechanisms behind social media involvement.

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