Working with Verge

by Richard Lum

The Verge framework, also known in Europe as the Ethnographic Futures Framework, was developed a decade ago by Richard Lum and Michele Bowman.

Since then it has found its way into futures practice largely by word of mouth, as practitioners shared it as they collaborated on projects. But there hasn't been a written account by either of its creators.

As a futurist who has used Verge regularly as a framework for scenario-building, and has also shared it with colleagues with more of an innovation focus, it has long been a source of frustration that such a valuable tool was so poorly documented.

I am delighted, therefore, that Compass is able to publish the first article on Verge, its history and underlying theory, its methodology, and its application. (AC)

Put simply, Verge is a general practice framework for futures work, a way to frame and explore changes in the world. It was originally intended as an alternative taxonomy for environmental scanning, and has evolved through use into a general practice framework that is used today by foresight professionals at virtually every stage of futures research.

The framework is composed of six domains of human experience: Define, Relate, Connect, Create, Consume, and Destroy. These domains can most easily be understood as questions that researchers and process participants ask about how people are experiencing the world. How do we Define things? How do we Relate to one another? How do we Connect to each other?

I developed Verge with Michele Bowman in 2004, as part of a corporate environmental scanning service that we had planned to offer (it never quite got off the ground). Both she and I were understandably weary of STEEP; although it is intuitive and has a simple organizing value for most organizations new to foresight work, the schema often feels "flat" and unsophisticated to experienced practitioners. Thus, the original desire was to have a fresh set of lenses through which to perceive and understand change, and specifically to provide categories for environmental scanning.

My answer to this was to attempt to come up with a new set of categories, categories that would "anthropomorphize" scanning. Anthropomorphize was not the right term, but the idea was to look out through someone's eyes, to generate categories that got closer to some basic ways that people experience and understand life. Frankly, I have never been convinced that I got that close to my original goal, but the six domains seem to work reasonably well in practice.

So, the Verge domains were never really intended for more than scanning. What resulted, however, is that practitioners found the framework useful not just for scanning, but for various forms of forecasting, analysis, and general group process. To date, Verge has been used in a

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variety of projects in the EU (particularly in the UK), Africa, Asia, and the United States. It has been used for clients as diverse as Nissan Motor Company, PepsiCo, Eurostar, and the Singapore Civic Service College.

As mentioned above, the framework is currently composed of six domains. I initially wanted to have clearly differentiated categories, but in practice people interpret the domains differently

and sometimes loosely, resulting in a somewhat fluid and overlapping set of definitions.

I suspect this tendency of practitioners to redefine or reinterpret the domains helps to make it seem such a versatile framework. At the same time, there is a multitude of issues that could logically be placed in more than one domain. For instance, law-making could be seen as an act of Define just as much as it is an act of Create. Additionally, the perspective of the observer is paramount: what is clearly Destroy to one person (attempts to undermine rules and norms) could be Define or Create (a new order) to another.
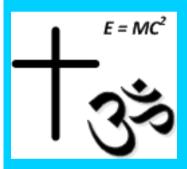
I think the most important reason why the framework has provided such value to practitioners is that the domains generate much richer and more vivid details of actual life as lived by real people, than the traditional categories like STEEP, which tend to make people think in large, structural, and abstract terms. For instance, in a workshop setting, asking participants to either critique or to imagine how they will relate to another or how they will create value for others immediately evokes imagery of daily life, imagery that helps make the future more real.

The six domains are as follows:

Define: The Define domain speaks to the concepts, ideas, and paradigms we use to define ourselves and the world around us. This includes things like worldview, paradigms, and social values and attitudes.
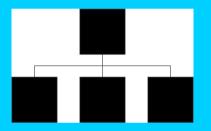
Relate: Deals with the social structures and relationships that organize people and create organizations. Here we look at things like family structures, business models, and governance structures.
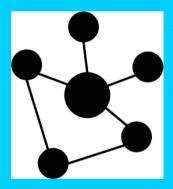
Connect: Encompasses the technologies and practices used to connect people, places, and things. Connect looks for things like information technology, urban design, and language.

The concepts, ideas and paradigms we use to define the world around us
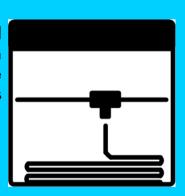
Social structures and relationships which link people and organizations

The technologies used to connect people, places and things

The processes and technology through which we create goods and services

The ways in which we acquire and use the goods and services we create

The ways in which we destroy value and the reasons for doing so

Create: Concerned with the technology and processes through which we produce goods and services. This is all about things like manufacturing, efficiency, and rule-making.

Consume: About the ways in which we acquire and use the goods and services we create. This domain is about issues like modes of exchange, consumer preferences, and marketing.

Destroy: About the ways in which we destroy value and the reasons for doing so. Here we are concerned with phenomena like violence and killing, waste, and attempts to undermine rules and norms. Table 1 includes examples of issues that fall within each of the Verge domains.

Using the Framework

Verge is a general practice framework in the sense that it can be used in just about any aspect of futures work. As a set of lenses, it can be used to filter or search. As a categorization scheme it can be used to organize results. To date, I think the most common types of use have been in activities like implications discussions and "incasting." For our purposes here, let us group typical applications into three basic activities: scanning, forecasting, and analysis.

Scanning

The most straightforward use of the framework is to use the Verge domains as an alternative to the traditional STEEP categories for research. Used like this, its original application, the Verge domains are used to organize an environmental scanning research effort, using the domains as research areas, within which researchers hunt for weak signals. Similarly, the Verge domains can be used to "bucket" the results of scanning and research, regardless of the organization of the research effort.

Table 1: Examples of issues falling within each Verge domain

Domain	Examples
Define	• The shift from a Newtonian scientific worldview to one that sees chaos, complexity, and quantum phenomena • Active, interventionist government policies gaining favor over laissez faire economic theories • People expanding their definition of "natural" to include human-built structures
Relate	• Networked enterprises eschewing traditional office work spaces and large full time staff in favor of collaboration and outsourcing via Web-based tools • Age cohort differences in family and child rearing patterns • Young physicians opting for salaried employment rather than private practice
Connect	• Upward trend in individuals using mobile devices to access information and communicate • Prevalence of internet-based social network services • Emerging community fault lines over proposed mass transit plans
Create	• Rising popularity of the DIY ethos • Extrapolating the uses for advanced 3D printing • The push for "localization" and local sourcing emerging across several sectors
Consume	• Business models based on the "sharing economy" premise • Community efforts to reduce household water use • Trends in the amount of disposable income controlled by youth
Destroy	• The falling trend of formally declared wars between established states • Potential hazard of engineered nanoparticles on human health and the broader biological landscape • "Cyber-bullying" and the changing social dynamics for American youth

Forecasting

Verge is often used in various ways during forecasting exercises. Two methods include emerging issues analysis and interaction analysis. Often related to a scanning effort, the Verge framework has been used to direct efforts to identify and forecast potential emerging issues. Verge interaction analysis involves forecasting the impact of changes in one domain as they cascade across other domains. This method can be used to generate entire scenarios.

Analysis

The Verge domains are often used to look at the implications of trends, emerging issues, scenarios, and other forecasts. To do this practitioners will modify an implications wheel to use the Verge domains to "slice the pie" rather than using the traditional STEEP categories. Alternatively they might build a matrix

Combing the Three Horizons Framework with Verge to Analyze the Futures of Governance

| | managers[1] | entrepreneurs | visionaries |
	First Horizon	**Second Horizon**	**Third Horizon**
Define	Newtonian physics, popular sovereignty	Systems, complexity science, networks	???
Relate	Representative government	Online social networks	*machinarchy*
Connect	Mass media	Internet, social media, mobile devices	Internet of things
Create	F2F deliberation, bureaucratic administration, voting	Crowdsourcing, civic hacking, co-production	Machines, algorithms, automation
Consume	Go to government, use what is provided	Websites, mobile apps	Ambient persistent governance
Destroy	Political marginalization (lack of suffrage)	Party polarization, special interest groups, voter apathy	Democracy, human agency, rampant sabotage

[1] Roles from Bill Sharpe via Wendy Schultz, PhD

with the Verge domains to explore implications. Interaction analysis, mentioned earlier, can also be used to reconsider an existing scenario or forecast by exploring logical cross-domain impacts that might alter the basic trajectory of the forecast.

Combining Frameworks

As shown in the discussion above about Analysis, the general practice framework can also be used in conjunction with other futures methods and concepts. By combining Verge with an additional framework, we are often able to use multiple perspectives of change at the same time. My favorite combinations at present include using some form of layered analysis with Verge and using three horizons with Verge, as seen in the example above.

Some Thoughts for Its Future

Looking forward, I expect that practitioners will continue to employ the framework in innovative ways with clients. It would be particularly interesting to see how individuals can employ the framework to do normative futures work.

Such an application might involve having different stakeholders describe their preferred futures through the domains and then having them describe what they think is the preferred future of competing stakeholders. Such an exercise would both help participants generate nuanced, human-level details related to people's hopes for the future, and might also set up a useful context for engaging one another in discourse, compromise, and the creation of shared vision.

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