

## Unknown risks – governance

### Risk Expert

#### **Roey Tzezana**

Roey Tzezana is a futurist and researcher at Blavatnik Interdisciplinary Cyber Research Centre (ICRC), Tel Aviv University. He is also affiliated with the Humanity Centered Robotics Initiative (HCRI) at Brown University, and is a senior scientific advisor for the World Future Society (WFS). The research has been conducted in collaboration with the World Future Society.

There is little doubt that global threat paradigms are going to evolve in the coming decades, but can governments prepare for new challenges even before they are identified as such? Many sponsor attempts to do just that. In Singapore, the Center for Strategic Futures has been studying ‘wild cards’ – improbable futures that would have a massive impact should they become reality. The US marine force has similarly explored surprising futures by asking the marines themselves to write science fiction stories, and the US National Intelligence Council has dealt with potential ‘game changers’ in a report describing the state of the world in 2030. More recently in 2017, the US Intelligence Advanced Research Activity (IARPA) agency opened the Geopolitical Forecasting Challenge, inviting the public to create new methods that could successfully forecast unexpected geopolitical events, disease outbreaks and other occurrences.

However, these are all projects led by national governments for national interest. The only similar attempts sponsored by multiple governments were two projects erected by the European Union in this last decade – FESTOS and iKnow – inviting global experts to create wild card scenarios about unexpected opportunities and risks. The results, however, have not yet been added to the agendas of other international bodies, or resulted in a coordinated governance body for unknown risks.

One core insight from those projects has been the role of ‘weak signals’: hints that a strange future might come closer to fulfillment, and which could be tracked by government analysts. As surveillance technologies leap forward, some nations may be looking for novel ways to gather such weak signals. China, for example, is making use of nearly two hundred million CCTV cameras, together with a facial recognition system, to track citizens and their doings. Predictive policing algorithms are used to forecast the chances of Chinese individuals conducting crime, allowing the police to intervene before the crime is actually carried out. Under the auspices of the Xue Liang (“Sharp Eyes”) program, people are supposed



to look at recorded clips of others and identify suspicious behavior and possibly weak signals. While this system is mostly expected to lead to “shame and blame”, it is conceivable that it will also be used to detect new and unknown risks.

Similar surveillance paradigms that keep an eye for weak signals – within the country or without – might aid in alerting authorities about the near-fruiting of wild cards. However, privacy considerations prevent most governments from enacting similar omnipresent surveillance schemes. Furthermore, potential catastrophes are essentially ignored by governments in their strategic plans, under the pressure of limited time, money and attention.

Where governments are lacking, private and public organizations may step in. Some, like TechCast Global, seek expert advice about the likelihood of wild card scenarios becoming a reality, independent of any governmental support. Others, like the Good Judgement Project, invite the wider public – experts and laymen – to assess the chances that both plausible and implausible scenarios will come to fruition within a defined timeframe. By identifying superforecasters – respondents whose forecasts are more accurate than 98% of participants – they can form a more reliable forecast for the short-term future. Another venture, Swarm, utilizes a combination of crowdsourcing and AI, to produce more accurate forecasts than either human beings or predictive algorithms would have come up with on their own. These projects act like electronic prediction markets, where people bet on future events: they outsource signal tracking to a crowd of observers incentivized by market mechanisms to act as monitors.

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All of these organizations can serve as a boon to governments. They constantly sniff for subtle hints and weak signals, and are able to alert governments when a related wild card becomes more plausible. Unfortunately, many governing bodies are unaware of these organizations, or even try to confine their activities – as in the case of prediction markets, which are seen as illegal gambling venues and have been terminated in many nations.

The only way to prepare for the unexpected is to construct scenarios ahead of time, and harness collective energies to highlight the more plausible ones as they come closer to fruition. While we cannot be sure what 2020, 2030 or 2050 will look like, if we continue to think about potential wild cards and monitor for weak signals in the present, we will at least be able to reduce the extent of the unknown, and better prepare for new risk scenarios.