



The Futures Literacy Company

How
will
we
disgust
our
descendants?

In cooperation with



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STUDIÓW NAD PRZYSZŁOŚCIĄ

Letter from the CEO

Imagine that you are lucky enough (or unlucky – depending on your perspective) to live another hundred years. The year is now 2123 and you are at your current age plus one hundred. You are surrounded by your family and friends, or maybe some reporters, perhaps even some non-human beings (whatever feels right, this part is up to you). They are curious to learn about your first-hand experience of living a century earlier. As the conversation progresses, you grow more and more uncomfortable. Most of the questions start with something like “How did you...?”, as one might expect. However, as you rummage in your memory and do your best to provide a faithful account of life in 2023, you see something much worse than bewilderment on your listeners' faces. Everyone is gracious and adequately respectful but you quickly realise that the follow-up questions are veiled versions of a half-accusing, half-disgusted “**How could you...?**”.



Is the above highly probable? It likely is not. Is it plausible? That is debatable and depends on several factors, but it is not my goal to provide the answer. The point is that this imaginary situation is a useful tool for seeing the present from a different angle. Think about how our current ways could disgust our distant ancestors. You can surely name a few things that seem evident and are probably already present in public discourse around the world. So we need to try harder: is there something about our contemporary way of life that is common now but could be perceived as highly controversial in the future – something that virtually no one, including you, tries to question or even thinks of questioning? This is a far more difficult query but we can assume that our distant ancestors were also oblivious to how we would perceive some of their ways.

You could rightly argue that morality is notorious for being difficult to define with scientific criteria. Perhaps the idea of an objective morality does not ring as bad as “moral relativism”, but it is almost equally disputable. So how do we decide what is wrong and right? And who are we to judge? For the needs of this project, we evaded the murky waters of such considerations and asked ourselves a far simpler and rather straightforward question: How might we disgust our descendants? And in particular: Which of those future triggers of disgust are we largely oblivious to?

Does it all matter? It does, for a number of reasons. First, this sort of reflection could improve your grasp of the future by encouraging you to question your assumptions, imagine alternatives, surf the wave of uncertainty, and by making you more futures literate. More importantly: the sooner we, humans, realise our *contemporary barbarisms*, the sooner we can move towards a better, more mature humanity. If these reasons are still not good enough for you, then how about a chance to join the ranks of *the enlightened*, who are ahead of their times? Read on!

Norbert Kołos
managing partner
4CF The Futures Literacy Company



Introduction

It is a challenge to look at the present through the eyes of a person from the future. To make such a perspective more tangible, 4CF The Futures Literacy Company launched a joint initiative with the Polish Society for Futures Studies. Its aim was to investigate things that we can potentially... disgust our descendants with.

It would be short-sighted to assume that we, as humanity, have reached such a level of maturity that our descendants will not find some aspects of our – apparently civilised – everyday life repulsive and sad. Maybe, if we look forward, we can accelerate the change towards a more mature and just society that future generations would perceive not as having unwittingly persisted in barbarism, but as having initiated change for the better (whatever it might mean for the "more advanced humanity"). Perhaps though, we are missing the point entirely and the very fact that we are now describing something as desirable will seem bizarre and barbaric to future humans. Such questions made the challenge all the more interesting.

Methodology

In the first phase of the study, we asked people professionally involved in foresight/futures studies to submit their ideas of what might disgust our descendants. We then analysed, grouped and, in most cases, rephrased the answers for the sake of clarity and to avoid the repetition of similar insights. The touched-up list contained 93 potential contemporary barbarisms.

In the second phase, we asked the broader public to identify the most surprising, most eye-opening contemporary "barbarisms" which might disgust our descendants. We **did not try to pinpoint the most probable proposals** (expected or foreseen to disgust our descendants). **Nor were we interested in the most popular ones** (regarded by the greatest number of survey participants as likely to be considered barbaric in the future). In fact, we were looking for something completely contrary to the above. The search focused on insights that were **the most eye-opening**: plausible barbarisms that question firmly held assumptions about the future, resulting in an inspiring *Aha!* moment for many of our respondents.

For each of the 93 potential contemporary barbarisms, we asked "How much of a revelation is it to you that [an item] might be considered disgusting by our descendants?". The answers were provided as assessments on a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 meant "not a surprise at all or disagreement with the notion" (i.e. zero points could either mean that an idea was perceived as unsurprising or implausible) and 5 indicated a "total eye-opener".

Study Results








The fact that in 2122 our descendants might perceive **nature lacking legal rights in 2023** as barbaric, turned out to be the most eye-opening insight for the 50 contemporary barbarians who evaluated the ideas. **It achieved an excellent average score of 3.31 out of 5 possible points.**

The second most revealing idea was that we **need to work to make a living in 2023. It scored an average of 3.06 out of 5 points.** It was highly surprising to the participants of the public survey but not quite as shocking to the futurists who took part in our 1st survey: similar notions were independently submitted by 5 experts.

People living in 2023 were also surprised that the **virtual lack of recognition for sophisticated non-human intelligence, sentience and its needs** might be seen as barbaric by people in 2123. **The average assessment was 3.02 out of 5 points.** The proposal was independently submitted by 3 futurists in our 1st survey.









On the other end of the spectrum, the most obvious barbarism, or maybe something that would simply not be seen as barbaric, with a score of only 1.67 points, were **abortion bans in many countries around the world.** The fact that the **advancement of space exploration is mainly driven by the arms race** in our times also turned out to be an obvious or irrelevant barbarism, scoring just 1.73. According to survey participants, the third most evident barbarism that might seem disgusting in 2122 was **digitalisation not being equally widespread around the globe in 2023.**

The table below lists all the proposed barbarisms and their average evaluation.

	Item	Result (0-5)	Category
	Nature (e.g. rivers) was lacking legal rights.	3.31	Policy & Government
	People needed to work to make a living.	3.06	Society
	There was virtually no recognition for sophisticated non-human intelligence, sentience and its needs.	3.02	Society
	There was no DNA-matching for couples before procreation.	2.88	Health & Medicine
	There were virtually no regulations limiting potential threats stemming from new technology, incl. AI.	2.88	Technology
	People were considering only one reality, thus ignoring our impact on the other ones.	2.88	Society
	Nation states and their borders (limiting freedom of movement) still existed.	2.83	Policy & Government

	Item	Result (0-5)	Category
	People did not create anticipatory governance systems for artificial general intelligence.	2.81	Technology
	Robots were lacking legal rights.	2.69	Policy & Governments
	Our image and concept of nature emphasised pureness devoid of traces of human activity.	2.67	Environment
	Technology was seen as a panacea to humanity's problems.	2.65	Technology
	People were working in the open without proper protective gear (e.g. UV protection, breathing filters).	2.65	Health & Medicine
	Physicians used antibiotics to kill minute living (and semi-living) beings.	2.63	Health & Medicine
	Most people were neither used to nor trained to take feedback loops into consideration in their everyday life decisions.	2.58	Society
	Individualism was still widespread in the world.	2.56	Society
	A single worldview – whether scientific, religious or any other – was sufficient for many to explain everything.	2.56	Society
	Cultural models had so many negative effects (consumerism, short-termism, individualism, human supremacy and identity, opinions overruling science, cancel culture, cultural idiocracy, "time is money", loss of cultural variety, too little concern for the youth...).	2.54	Society
	People did not accompany their relatives and friends in the process of dying and reduced their corpses to ashes as quickly as possible.	2.52	Society
	Religious organisations were tax exempt in many places around the world.	2.52	Economy
	Genetic modifications of babies were neither allowed nor possible.	2.50	Health & Medicine
	Economic gains were amongst the main motivators for people around the world.	2.48	Economy



	Item	Result (0-5)	Category
	Elderly care was institutionalised.	2.48	Economy
	There was a sharp decline in hand skills due to automation.	2.48	Society
	Physical interfaces were needed to interact with machines.	2.46	Technology
	Futures literacy was not an obligatory subject in schools and universities.	2.46	Society
	Procreation required sexual intercourse.	2.46	Health & Medicine
	Psychiatric treatment was so primitive and relied heavily on mind-numbing drugs.	2.44	Health & Medicine
	Birth was natural.	2.44	Health & Medicine
	Big cities had so many negative effects on humans (e.g. poverty, inequalities, blight, filth, inefficiencies, waste, and pollution).	2.44	Policy & Government
	Taxation was omnipresent and accepted across the world.	2.44	Economy
	Religion dictated norms and human rights in some countries around the world.	2.42	Society
	People were ignoring the risk of infection stemming from the use of physical money, shaking hands, using public bathrooms without previous sanitisation etc.	2.42	Health & Medicine
	Medicine and healing were heavily biased, predicated on white males.	2.40	Health & Medicine
	Unhealthy food was produced and consumed.	2.38	Food
	People believed they would stay only on Earth.	2.38	Technology

	Item	Result (0-5)	Category
	Mass media was driven by profit instead of truth and accuracy in reporting.	2.38	News & Information
	Education systems were not effectively preparing youth for contemporary or future needs and challenges.	2.35	Society
	Pressure systems for desalination were not used.	2.33	Technology
	Unethical behaviour justified by a so-called greater good was widely accepted.	2.33	Society
	People were using resources to grow lawns instead of food.	2.33	Food
	People were prejudiced against mystics and spirituality.	2.33	Society
	Gun ownership was still allowed.	2.33	Security
	People were performing jobs that could (even then) be automatised.	2.31	Society
	People did not appreciate Timothy Leary's future SMILE (Space Migration, Intelligence Increasing, and Life Extension).	2.31	Technology
	Lots of food was wasted.	2.29	Food
	There was widespread reluctance for solving some of humanity's crucial problems (e.g. diseases & genetic disorders) in a top priority, emergency mode.	2.29	Health & Medicine
	Physical travel was common.	2.27	Technology
	Profit from unethical business was considered success.	2.27	Society
	Sustainability was not an imperative.	2.27	Environment

	Item	Result (0-5)	Category
	Many people were dying of age and illnesses already preventable in 2022.	2.27	Health & Medicine
	People were lying to each other and believed so many lies.	2.25	Society
	People had poor work-life balance due to 40+ working weeks.	2.25	Society
	Mass media had huge control over large social groups.	2.23	Technology
	Mass media was used for misinformation.	2.21	News & Information
	Life expectancy was low, and (to make matters worse) highly determined by income.	2.19	Health & Medicine
	Urban design favoured car owners.	2.19	Policy & Government
	The economic system was flawed, with too much power in the hands of large corporations.	2.17	Economy
	So-called "tax havens" existed.	2.17	Economy
	Most people consumed meat harvested in brutal, unsustainable conditions.	2.17	Food
	People did not do enough for vulnerable populations.	2.17	Society
	Technological conservatism was widespread.	2.17	Technology
	Batteries were still used.	2.17	Technology
	Children's school promotion was not adjusted to their needs, interests and capabilities.	2.17	Society

	Item	Result (0-5)	Category
	Family values were at a low point.	2.15	Society
	Violence and crime were widespread (including mass killings, domestic violence, human trafficking, various forms of abuse and harassment, cybercrime).	2.15	Security
	The clean energy challenge was still unsolved.	2.13	Environment
	Governing was plagued by short-termism, corruption, manipulation, nepotism, outdated mindsets and systems, etc.	2.10	Policy & Government
	Babies were born with severe disabilities or acute genetic illnesses.	2.10	Health & Medicine
	Education inequality due to economic differences and birth place was common.	2.10	Society
	... and before, people were causing collective trauma with their wars, genocide and other atrocities, still affecting people living even a hundred years later.	2.04	Society
	Poverty and its consequences (hunger, housing, energy etc.) were common, despite available resources to prevent them.	2.04	Policy & Government
	Waste management was poor and inadequate.	2.04	Environment
	Fatalities in road accidents and in the workplace were fairly common.	2.04	Security
	Discrimination based on colour, class, gender, sexuality etc. was common around the world.	2.04	Society
	Mass incarceration and state-managed execution were still used as punishment for behaviours that violate social rules and norms.	2.04	Policy & Government
	Functional illiteracy was fairly common around the world.	2.04	Society
	There were still wars (and consequences thereof, incl. war refugees, civilian fatalities, threats from nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, poor support for invaded countries).	2.02	Security

	Item	Result (0-5)	Category
	Countries were using power over other states for economic benefit.	1.98	Economy
	The world was full of huge wealth inequalities.	1.98	Economy
	Healthcare systems were highly inefficient and with limited access.	1.98	Health & Medicine
	Gender inequalities (i.a. in terms of human rights, wages and leadership of various communities, institutions and companies) were widespread around the globe.	1.96	Society
	The destruction of ecosystems and loss of biodiversity were commonplace.	1.94	Environment
	Actions meant to stop and reverse climate change were inadequate.	1.92	Environment
	Abortion was used for birth prevention instead of simple and harmless, easily available medical means.	1.92	Health & Medicine
	Air and water were extremely polluted as a result of the use of fossil fuels, plastics and other human behaviour.	1.90	Environment
	Martial arts were performed without adequate protective gear.	1.90	Security
	There were many autocracies and democracy was flawed, with populism thriving.	1.83	Policy & Government
	Child labour was still used in many places around the world.	1.81	Policy & Government
	Privileged individuals and groups (either from birth or because of wealth/power) were abusing their position.	1.79	Policy & Government
	Many people still smoked tobacco.	1.79	Health & Medicine
	Digitalisation was not equally widespread around the globe.	1.79	Society

	Item	Result (0-5)	Category
	The advancement of space exploration was mainly driven by the arms race in space.	1.73	Technology
	Abortion was banned in many countries around the world.	1.67	Society

4CF Commentary

We all know how difficult and – simultaneously – important it is to search for insights that are inconspicuous and often escape notice. They can change our perspective on what is good and desirable, what we should strive for and what needs to be prevented. Some of the ideas obtained in the course of the survey are true revelations. The results provide a great (though clearly non-exhaustive) compilation of the issues humanity needs to tackle without delay. It is worth noting that many of the highlighted concerns focus on sustainability in all its facets. This issue must be at the forefront of our thoughts, plans and actions today if we wish to avoid the decimation of species on Earth and lessen our descendants' discontent and disgust.

Some of the ideas might seem more obvious because they are as old as humanity itself: wars, violence, inequality, hunger and poverty. All are still present in today's world despite its constant progress, evident even if we look no farther back than the 19th century for comparison. Another handful of problems is still very high on today's agenda, including human rights, the decline of democracy, as well as environmental and climate change. It is actually good news: these notions are widespread and hardly eye-opening for most. Given that awareness is so high, the question is whether we are doing enough to bring about positive change in these areas. Will our ancestors think that we did enough? We should feel encouraged to take action, all the more so now, when no one seems surprised these notions will be considered barbaric.

Nevertheless, some of the ideas turned out to be true revelations for many respondents, especially those that are only now being shaped and could cause problems from a future perspective. The “winners” of the evaluation can serve as a good example: nature's lack of rights, the future of human labour, recognition and rights for non-human intelligence/sentience, the use of modern medical tech, discoveries aiming at human longevity, as well as threats resulting from new technologies and discoveries (such as AI or bioscience).

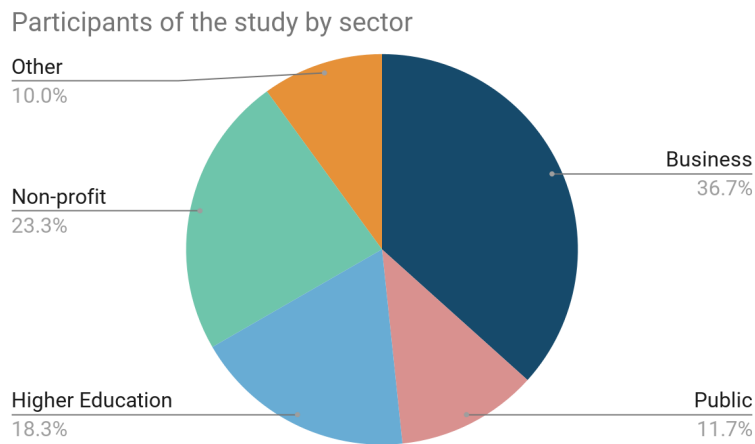
While analysing the ideas, it was interesting to consider the new realities that might arise from new discoveries or devastating human activities; to contemplate how today's predominant worldviews, cultural models and social patterns could potentially be erroneous.

We hope the report inspires discussion and opens new paths for research, provides ideas for scientific publications and, hopefully, encourages action in the present for the betterment of our future.

Annex

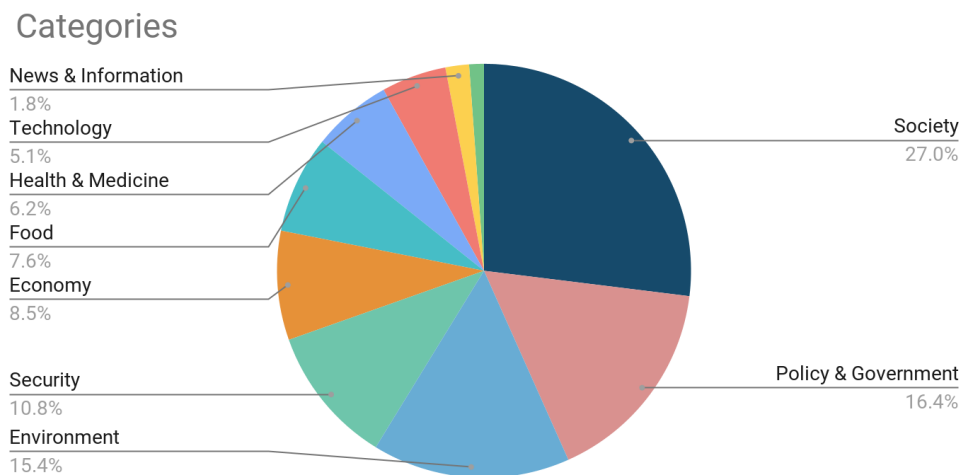
Survey Participants

50 survey participants of at least 16 nationalities evaluated the futurists' answers to "What will we disgust our descendants with?". 60 futurists submitted 434 ideas of barbarisms. They represented the following sectors:



Categories

The 434 ideas submitted in the survey can be divided into 9 areas.



The graph visualises how much is yet to be done in the field of government and policy. It also highlights the importance of societal changes, which could be a driving force for the fulfilment of desirable futures in all other areas of our existence.