Travails, Travels, and Trials: Report from the S.NET Roundtable on Plausibility

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Introduction

There is much trafficking of futures. From the rush of public policy documents and market forecasts that boldly begin with "The Future of…" to the growing number of STS panels that look at expectations, imaginaries, and visions, the future has become a busy topic. In our 2010 S.NET Roundtable Session, we honed in on a less traveled topic in the domain—plausibility.

The concept of plausibility invites us to think about the quality of anticipatory knowledge and asks us to consider questions around trust, legitimacy and the epistemology of the future (von Schomberg, Periera and Funtowitc 2005). Considering not just ways of knowing the future, but the power and mechanisms through which the future works was a central concern of the session participants. Roundtable participants were asked to explore their associations with plausibility and to delineate what is known about plausibility (state of knowledge, research results, literature and case studies) and what is unknown about plausibility (critical research questions). What follows is a synthesis of a searching and wild conversation that led to diverse insights and intriguing new questions. The rich discussion is thus smashed into three central themes: the work that plausibility accomplishes, the truthiness of plausibility, and the trials of assessing plausibility. These themes are then illustrated in a whimsical case of a confiscated snow globe.

1. Travails: The Work of Plausibility

The first theme derived from the S.NET Roundtable centered on the work of plausibility. While futures are broadly traded, questions of plausibility often arise in professional practices of foresight where the validity of a scenario is questioned. Plausibility is evoked as a soft measure of the quality of the scenarios. Walton (2008, p.161) argues that epistemological and ontological challenges of dealing with knowledge related to the future means that "plausible belief" rather than "true justified belief" should guide an evaluation of scenarios. Ramirez (2008, p. 189) makes the argument that clarity as a form of aesthetics is fundamental to scenario effectiveness when he says: "I believe that scenarios need to be like good literature—they need to be read by users in ways that help their minds render futures 'more real than real.'" Yet the notion of scenarios as radiant and readily accessible is also treated as a tension by Cunha et al. (2006, p.

950) who are concerned about "expectancy confirming evidence rather than dissonant, disconfirming information."

Aligning with the tensions in the literature, Roundtable participants noted that the relevance of plausibility for the production and consumption of scenarios is not clear. In some milieus, plausibility is heralded as a pre-requisite for useful scenarios. In order for the future to become real and tangible and actionable, scenarios must be plausible. This sentiment is particularly strong in among those working on climate issue: In order for the political machinery to move on the issue, potential outcomes must be rendered persuasively. Another faction in the scenario planning community maintains that if scenarios are in the realm of the plausible, then only conventional wisdom is addressed and the consequential actions will be business as usual. This common knowledge is considered a useless maintenance of the status quo, as opposed to harnessing the real power of scenarios to fundamentally disrupt entrenched ideologies and explore uncomfortable knowledge. The tension between the plausible and the implausible is vexing: Is something plausible just palatable? Is the goal of critical futures thinking more about exploring uncommon knowledge?

This tension spurred Roundtable participants to discuss the conservative nature of plausibility and relationship between plausibility and credibility. Conversation about the travails of plausibility gave rise to normative questions around using scenarios as justifications for action. While developing and using scenarios to justify a policy action or business decision is a fascinating process to unpick, participants also noted that futuristic claims tend to be unruly and rambunctious. The work of a futuristic claim occurs not just at the point of origin (i.e. a scenario-building workshop) but continues as the claim travels in new settings. Roundtable participants summoned research into the framing of social movements as viable ways into the productive side of plausibility (see Benford & Snow 2000, Lounsbury et al. 2003).

5. Travels: The Variable "Truthiness" of Plausibility

While plausibility is sometimes touted in scenario practice as a metric of evaluation, it rarely is defined or addressed with any conceptual or methodological rigor. The Webster's definition is: "1. Seemingly or apparently valid, likely, or acceptable; credible: *a plausible excuse.* 2. Giving a deceptive impression of truth or reliability." Smacking of manipulation, this definition gives rise to questions about the ethics of futures work. The ambiguity latent in the definition (i.e. seemingly, apparently) highlights how the future is caught up in dangerous rhetoric—a kind of talk that cannot be proven or easily refuted. We cannot gather evidence or data using traditional scientific methods, or as Brumbaugh (1966, p. 649) put it: "[T]here are no past possibilities and there are no future facts."

Thus ethical questions arise as plausibility enters an unavoidably politicized space to go to work. Ideas around 'speculative ethics' were suggested as relevant (Nordmann 2007, Nordmann and Rip 2009). Prospective claims travel readily and eagerly and during their journey take on new meanings, purposes and power. STS scholars are especially keen on following objects and language and rarely encounter innocent or impotent discourse and thus know that claims, opinions, assertions—whatever their temporal location—are imbued with values, agendas and subjectivities that perform. However, it was noted in the Roundtable discussion that futuristic statements have an added vulnerability as they are pardoned from evidence-based scrutiny. In this vein, partici-

pants questioned the relationship between belief and plausibility and considered the mechanisms through which plausibility becomes a tool of persuasion.

STS scholarship on the construction and solidification of claims is thus a relevant lens to begin to unpick how plausibility is argued and with what effects. While plausibility arguments are not always apparent or explicit, SNET participants supported research that dissects the regimes of power that underpin a plausibility claim. Built into that task is the elementary understanding that plausibility is not intrinsic in the thing (e.g. carbon nanotubes for energy storage), but is more about the work, associations and resources poured into validating and creating 'truths' around it (see Fortun 2008, Brown & Michael 2003, Selin 2007). On an original thread, a couple of Roundtable participants were interested in how theoretical approaches to science fiction literature, for instance, those that look into cognitive estrangement, could be useful.

6. Trials: Assessing Plausibility

It was clear that plausibility matters under conditions of uncertainty and that a look into the variety of milieus where uncertainty is handled would yield interesting empirical insights about the ways and means of plausibility. Most generally, we assess the plausibility of stories and promises and other things we cannot verify. Different communities will be swayed by different kinds of proof, and thus assessments of plausibility should be examined with attention to the particular context and audience. Thus cross-cultural differences in claiming and assessing plausibility arose as an area for more inquiry.

This bind to time and place highlights that plausibility assessments are linked to particular audience. Etymologically, plausibility is derived from "applause"—a claim worthy of applause is deemed plausible. This led one Roundtable group to consider the intensity of applause from audiences that are connoisseurs versus the assessments that come from audiences who have more informal modes of appreciation.

There was a concern about research into plausibility yielding finer and finer modes of assessing plausibility, such that the razor sharp gaze would destroy the richness encapsulated with the non-deterministic concept. Roundtable participants looked to the work of Hacking (1990, 2006) and Porter (1986) to explore the rise of statistical and probabilistic thinking and especially the shift of probability from a soft to a hard concept (Botanski and Thévenot 2006, Johsen and Toulmin 1988). Plausibility stands as a difference to prediction, diverging from probability and arises as potentially useful in contexts where numbers give an incomplete picture. The impulse to measure plausibility may in effect blend plausibility with subjective probability and obscure more diverse ways of knowing that could be instructive.

7. A Forsaken Snow Globe: An Illustrative Example

A month after the SNET roundtable, I found myself at another airport, in another city, and these three themes vividly coalesced in a confrontation about a snow globe. On my way to present my recent work on plausibility at the Society for Risk Analysis annual conference, I was accused of risky behavior, though I am concerned about the analysis. After my very first body scan, I was accosted by a security officer, ushered away from the crowd, and forced to unpack my over packed suitcase. The alarming item was

found, delicately wrapped in layers of hot pink tissue paper. Behold! A Deco inspired snow globe, clearly shaken from the disgraceful affair. After debating the time involved in returning to the counter to pay $25 to check my suitcase to save the $6 snow globe, I surrendered the snow globe. In an odd fit of anger, amusement and astonishment, I probed the security risk with the officer to learn that they have a *policy prohibiting snow globes*. Pushing away images of a desolate metal room filled of confiscated snow globes, I focused on her explanation of the policy. Since they cannot gain access to the magical juice, no snow globe is safe even if they contain only three ounces of glittering liquid.

Figure 1. Confiscated Snow Globe, Los Angeles International Airport.
Source: Original picture.

How is it that there is a policy prohibiting snow globes? By what mechanism does an innocent pleasure-giver, a rare treat of slowness and sparkle, become transformed to a security threat? Given my obsession with plausibility, I began to wonder what imaginaries are at play. First, we have the climate of fear and a thwarted attack in 2006 thought to involve liquid explosives. The thing that didn't happen—the liquid bombs killing people- became the justification for much to do, the basis for a whole host of interventions. From one particular 'almost event' made plausible through intention, many other events have been imagined plausible, right down to my forsaken snow globe as a vehicle of mass destruction. While I venture (hopefully) that the TSA did not envision snow globe packing terrorists, it is interesting that one scenario becomes justification for such a wide array of other policies.

Even more remarkable than the plausible future enacted through my snow globe capture was my forced compliance. The experience of my limited agency is perhaps the most frustrating element of the snow globe affair. I could not revolt. I could not protest. While I was sad to give up one of the only non-religious holiday icons available, I doubted that any complaint would be more than futile and considering the triviality of the issue, I acquiesced.

While the snow globe affair seems mundane and inconsequential, it shines light on the work that a plausible scenario (snow globe packing terrorists) performs and the

performance (e.g. assorted security rituals) required of others. The truthiness of the scenario seems absurd, yet it is possible to track how one scenario (the thwarted attack) becomes translated into other plausible stories. Finally, it is interesting how the assessment of the risk is expert and official, leaving little room for other modes of assessment thus limiting the agency and resistance of those affected.

8. The Future of Plausibility

At the close of the SNET roundtable, there was no consensus on a singular direction to take research into plausibility. Instead, plausibility is a worthwhile sparring partner that brings up interesting STS questions around evidence, trust, science and culture and decision-making. Inquiries into plausibility provide a way into investigating the rhetorical and practical strength of future-oriented claims. From snow globes to climate change, from nanotechnology to renewable energy, imaginaries are at work and provide rich fodder for inquiries into the travels, travails and trials of plausibility.

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