

A NEW TYPOLOGY OF WILDCARDS

by Oliver Markley and John Petersen

In long-range forecasting, futurists sometimes speak of 'wild cards' – usually defined as possible events that are considered to have a low probability of occurrence, but a very high impact (often negative) if they were to occur. An asteroid hitting the earth is sometimes used as a clear-cut example.

Although the following distinction has not yet appeared in the literature of futures research to my knowledge, I believe it is self-evidently useful to think of a second distinct type of wild card:

- Type I Wild Card: low-probability, high- impact, high-credibility
- Type II Wild Card: high-probability, high- impact, low-credibility

It is also useful to distinguish a Type III Wild Card, defined as being a Type II wild card that has come into enough public awareness as to engender heated dispute about its causal credibility (and derivatively, its assumed probability). Thus, the following additional typology of wild cards is proposed:

- Type III Wild Card: high probability, high-impact, disputed-credibility
- Type IV Legitimated Critical Forecast: high-probability, high-impact, high-credibility.

The lack of credibility that characterizes a Type II Wild Card can stem from at least four sources:

- **Ignorance** – where the relevant knowledge about the wild card has not yet disseminated
- **Disbelief** – where there is an active belief in the impossibility of the wild card
- **Disinformation** – where the relevant knowledge about the wild card has been camouflaged by propagandistic distortion
- **Taboo** – 'Elephants in the living room' that if you even talk publicly will severely undermine your legitimacy as a credible actor.

The whole Global Warming hypothesis is probably the most well-known contemporary example of what (for scientific thinkers at least), was originally a Type I Wild Card (i.e., there was general acceptance of the science involved, just no notion that the probability of high levels of atmospheric CO₂ was so great). It became a Type II Wild Card when a few scientists and futurists realized the magnitude of impacts associated with continued expansion of fossil fuel consumption. And it moved on to become a Type III Wild Card when debate heated up as politicians and others were moved by industry-sponsored propaganda that discredited the science involved. Now, for most informed observers, it has attained the legitimacy of a credible, but 'wild' forecast (i.e., Type IV: high probability, high impact, and high credibility), even though a subculture of "global warming deniers" continues to exist.

This is a short extract from an APF Compass article. Longer journal articles describing this can be found online at <http://www.imaginalvisioning.com/anticipating-disruptive-surprises-with-futures-research/>.

Oliver Markley is Professor Emeritus of Human Sciences and Studies of the Future, Univ. Houston- Clear Lake; John Petersen is Founder and President of The Arlington Institute.

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