

The Atlantic

Why Aren't There More Women Futurists?

Most of the big names in futurism are men. What does that mean for the direction we're all headed?



Vasily Fedosenko /Reuters

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In the future, everyone's going to have a robot assistant. That's the story, at least.

And as part of that long-running narrative, Facebook just launched its virtual assistant. [They're calling it Money Penny](#)—the secretary from the James Bond Films. Which means the symbol of our march forward, once again, ends up being a nod back. In this case, Money Penny is a send-up to an age when Bond's womanizing was a symbol of manliness and many women were, no matter what they wanted to be doing, secretaries.

Why can't people imagine a future without falling into the sexist past? Why does the road ahead keep leading us back to a place that looks like the Tomorrowland of the 1950s? Well, when it comes to Money Penny, here's a relevant datapoint: More than two thirds of Facebook employees are men. That's a ratio reflected among another key group: futurists.

Both the World Future Society and the Association of Professional Futurists are headed by women right now. And both of those women talked to me about their desire to bring more women to the field. Cindy Frewen, the head of the [Association of Professional Futurists](#), estimates that about a third of their members are women. Amy Zalman, the CEO of the World Future Society, says that 23 percent of her group's members identify as female. But most lists of "top futurists" perhaps include one female name. Often, that woman is no longer working in the field.

Somehow, I've become a person who reports on futurists. I produce and host a podcast about what might happen in the future called *Meanwhile in the Future*. I write a column about people living cutting-edge lives for BBC Future. And one thing I've noticed is how overwhelmingly male and white they are.

It turns out that what makes someone a futurist, and what makes something futurism, isn't well defined. When you ask those who are part of official futurist societies, like the APF and the WFS, they often struggle to answer. There are some possible credentials—namely: a degree in foresight, [an emerging specialty](#) that often intersects with studies of technology and business. But the discipline

isn't well established—there's no foresight degree at Yale, or Harvard. And there are plenty of people who practice futurology who don't have one.

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Zalman defines a futurist as a person who embraces a certain way of thinking. “Being a futurist these days means that you take seriously a worldview and a set of activities and the recognition that foresight, with a capital F, isn't just thinking about what are the top 10 things this year, what are the trends unfolding.”

Frewen says that futurism won't ever be like architecture or medicine, in that “it's never going to be a licensed field.” But there are still things that many futurists agree people in their field shouldn't do. “We think of things now as more systems-based and more uncertain, you don't know what the future is, and that's a basic concept, so we try to avoid the people who think they can always know this is going to get better.”

Some people think of science fiction authors as futurists, while others don't. Some members of the APF include singularity researchers, others don't want to. Some people lump transhumanists into a broader category of futurists. Others don't. Here are some of the people popularly known as futurists: Aubrey de Gray, the chief researcher at the [Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence](#) Research Foundation; Elon Musk, the head of SpaceX; Sergey Brin, the co-founder of Google; Ray Kurzweil, the director of engineering at Google. They don't necessarily belong to a particular society—they might not even self-identify as futurists!—but they are driving the conversation about the future—very often

on stages, in public, backed by profitable corporations or well-heeled investors.

Which means the media ends up turning to Brin and Musk and de Gray and Kurzweil to explain what is going to happen, why it matters, and ultimately whether it's all going to be okay. The thing is: The futures that get imagined depend largely on the person or people doing the imagining.

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Why are there so few women? Much of it comes down to the same reasons there are so few women in science and technology, fields with direct links to futurism (which has a better ring to it than “strategic foresight,” the term some futurists prefer).

Zalman says futurism has actually fought to present itself in a certain way. When the field was founded in the 1960s, it came with a reputation that still lingers a bit today, she says. “Like magicians, crystal ball gazers, sort of flakey, that’s the reputation that followed the WFS for awhile. Because the field itself had to struggle to be taken seriously, that put more pressure on folks to demonstrate that they were scientific. And it was coded masculine.” While futurism includes not simply the future of gadgets, the field found itself pushing away some of the perceived “softer” elements of foresight: social change, family structures, cultural impacts—in favor of mathematical modeling and technology.

[Madeline Ashby](#), a futurist with a degree in strategic foresight who has worked for organizations like Intel Labs, the Institute for the Future, SciFutures, and Nesta, says that another big part of the gender imbalance has to do with optimism. “If you ask me, the one reason why futurism as a discipline is so white and male, is because white males have the ability to offer the most optimistic vision,” she says. They can get up on stage and tell us that the world will be okay, that technology will fix all our problems, that we’ll live forever. Mark Stevenson wrote a book called *An Optimist’s Tour of the Future*. TED speakers always seem

to end their talk, no matter how dire, on an upward-facing note.

Ashby says that any time she speaks in front of a crowd, and offers a grim view of the future, someone (almost always a man) invariably asks why she can't be more positive. "Why is this so depressing, why is this so dystopian," they ask.

"Because when you talk about the future you don't get rape threats, that's why," she says. "For a long time the future has belonged to people who have not had to struggle, and I think that will still be true. But as more and more systems collapse, currency, energy, the ability to get water, the ability to work, the future will increasingly belong to those who know how to hustle, and those people are not the people who are producing those purely optimistic futures."

"I don't know if I kind of pick up on the optimism as I pick up on the utter absurdity," said Sarah Kember, a professor of technology at the University of London who's [applied feminist theory to futurism](#) for years. "And that's great for me in some ways, it's been a traditional feminist strategy to expose absurdity. It's a key critique." She points out that as someone whose job it is to take a step back and analyze things like futurism from an outside view, a lot of the mainstream futurism starts to look pretty silly. "You've got smart bras and vibrating pants and talking kitchen worktops and augmented-reality bedroom mirrors that read the tags on your clothing and tell you what not to wear, and there's no reflection on any of this at all," she says.

Both Frewen of the APF and Zalman of the WFS told me that they were concerned about the gender imbalance in their field, and that they are hoping to help change it. But they also both reminded me that, compared to a lot of fields, futurism is a tiny speciality. And it's homogeneous in other ways, too. The majority of the WFS members are white, and most of them are 55 to 65 years old. "It is not okay for the WFS, although we care about them, to have only men from North America between the ages of 55 and 65," Zalman says. "We need all those other voices because they represent an experience."

Any time someone points out a gender or racial imbalance in a field (or, most often, the combination of the two) a certain set of people ask: Who cares? The future belongs to all of us—or, ultimately, none of us—why does it matter if the vast majority of futurists are white men? It matters for the same reasons diversity [drives market growth](#): because when only one type of person is engaged in asking key questions about a specialty—envisioning the future or otherwise—they miss a entire frameworks for identifying and solving problems. The relative absence of women at Apple is why the Apple Health kit [didn't have period tracking](#) until a few months ago, and why a revolutionary artificial heart can be deemed a success even when it [doesn't fit](#) 80 percent of women.

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Which brings us back to Money Penny, and all the other virtual assistants of the future. There are all sorts of firms and companies working to build robotic servants. Chrome butlers, chefs, and housekeepers. But the fantasy of having an indentured servant is a peculiar one to some. “That whole idea of creating robots that are in service to us has always bothered me,” says [Nnedi Okorafor](#), a science fiction author. “I’ve always sided with the robots. That whole idea of creating these creatures that are human-like and then have them be in servitude to us, that is not my fantasy and I find it highly problematic that it would be anyone’s.”

Or take longevity, for example. The idea that people could, or even should, push to lengthen lifespans as far as possible is popular. The life-extension movement, with Aubrey de Gray as one (very bearded) spokesman, has raised millions of dollars to investigate how to extend the lifespan of humans. But this is arguably only an ideal future if you're in as a comfortable position as his. "Living forever only works if you're a rich vampire from an Anne Rice novel, which is to say that you have compound interest," jokes Ashby. "It really only works if you have significant real-estate investments and fast money and slow money." (Time travel, as the comedian Louis C.K. [has pointed out](#), is another thing that is a distinctly white male preoccupation—going back in time, for marginalized groups, means giving up more of their rights.)

Beyond the particular futures that get funded and developed, there's also a broader issue with the ways in which people think about what forces actually shape the future. "We get some really ready-made easy ways of thinking about the future by thinking that the future is shapeable by tech development," said Kember, the professor of technology at University of London.

In the 1980s, two futurists (a man and a woman) wrote a book that invited key members of the futurist community to write essays on what they saw coming. The book was called *What Futurists Believe*, and it included profiles of 17 futurists, including Arthur C. Clarke and Peter Schwartz. All seventeen people profiled were men. And in some ways, they were very close to predicting the future. They seemed to grasp the importance of the cell phone and the trajectory of the personal computer. But they completely missed a huge set of other things. "What they never got right was the social side, they never saw flattened organizations, social media, the uprisings in the Middle East, ISIS using Twitter," says Frewen.

Terry Grim, a professor in the Studies of the Future program at the University of Houston, recalls a video she saw from the 1960s depicting the office of the

future. “It had everything pretty much right, they had envisioned the computer and fax machine and forward-looking technology products.” But there was something missing: “There were no women in the office,” she said.

Okorafor says that she’s gotten so used to not seeing anybody like herself in visions of the future that it’s not really surprising to her when it happens. “I feel like more of a tourist when I experience these imaginings, this isn’t even a place where I would exist in the first place,” she says. “In the type of setting, the environment, and the way everything is set up just doesn’t feel like it would be my future at all, and this is something that I experience regularly when I read or watch imagined futures, and this is part of what made me start writing my own.”

This is also perhaps why futurists often don’t talk about some of the issues and problems that many people face every day—harassment, child care, work-life balance, water rights, immigration, police brutality. “When you lose out on women’s voices you lose out on the issues that they have to deal with,” Ashby says. She was recently at a futures event where people presented on a global trends report, and there was nothing in the slides on the future of law enforcement. The questions that many people face about their futures are lost in the futures being imagined.

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In the 1970s, Alvin Toffler’s book *Future Shock* argued that there are three types of futurism the world needed: a science of futurism that could talk about the probability of things happening, an art of futurism that could explore what is possible, and a politics of futurism that could investigate what is preferable. Futurism has done well to develop the first side, building devices and technologies and frameworks through which to see technical advances. But Zalman says that it’s fallen down a bit on the other two. “Arts and humanities are given short shrift.”

“What I see is a bid for control over what the future will look like.”

In some ways, the art and politics of futurism are the harder pieces of the pie. Technology is often predictable. Humans, less so. “The solution to make things better is a really messy policy solution that has to be negotiated, it’s not pulling the sword from the stone or implanting the alien saucers with your stupid Mac virus or killing the shark, it’s getting people in a room with free coffee and doughnuts and getting them to talk,” said Ashby.

In order to understand what those who have never really felt welcome in the field of futurism think, I called someone who writes and talks about the future, but who doesn’t call themselves a futurist: Monica Byrne. Byrne is a science-fiction author and opinion writer who often tackles questions of how we see the future, and what kinds of futures we deem preferable. But when she thinks about “futurism” as a field, she doesn’t see herself. “I think the term futurist is itself is something I see white men claiming for themselves, and isn’t something that would occur to me to call myself even though I functionally am one,” she says.

Okorafor says that she too has never really called herself a futurist, even though much of what she does is use her writing to explore what’s possible. “When you sent me your email and you mentioned futurism I think that’s really the first time I started thinking about that label for myself. And it fits. It feels comfortable.”

When Byrne thinks about the term futurists, she thinks about a power struggle. “What I see is a bid for control over what the future will look like. And it is a future that is, that to me doesn’t look much different from [Asimov science fiction covers](#). Which is not a future I’m interested in.”

The futurism that involves glass houses and 400-year-old men doesn't interest her. "When I think about the kind of future I want to build, it's very soft and human, it's very erotic, and I feel like so much of what I identify as futurism is very glossy, chrome painted science fiction covers, they're sterile." She laughs. "Who cares about your jetpack? How does technology enable us to keep loving each other?"

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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