

Summary: PhD thesis

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Title: Foresight between Uncertainty and Convention: An ethnographic study of research policy foresight at the Research Council of Norway

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How to ensure that national economic and intellectual resources are channelled into the most promising key technology research areas in the future? Across Europe and throughout the last two decades this question has been addressed by national foresight programmes which gather experts, government stakeholders, industry representatives and sometimes even members of the public to help policy and decision makers to address future uncertainty and the role of priorities in establishing valuable research areas. Its wide-spread and diverse use on national, international, regional and organisational level evokes the question: What is foresight in practice? And further: How does such a participatory process contribute to the development of research policy and research programmes?

Drawing on resources in the academic field of science and technology studies, the emerging 'sociology of expectations' and concepts of coordination and evaluation inspired by Laurent Thévenot's notion of convention theory, this thesis explores how future uncertainty is used creatively, evaluated and dealt with through the collective construction of scenarios. The case study is a foresight project conducted by the national Research Council of Norway (RCN) in 2004, involving forty representatives from the field of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The objective is to learn from empirical observations how research policy institutions deal with the demand for a broad participation of stakeholders in the national debate on research priorities while at the same time having to ensure relevance of the findings in relation to established practices of organisational and political routines.

Using a multi-sited ethnographic approach the thesis follows these coordinating and evaluating activities closely during the development of scenarios meant to inform a large-scale research programme on ICT (2005-2015). Discussing the collection of scenario ideas, the writing of scenarios and the final evaluation of the created scenarios in relation to research programme priorities, the argument is developed that these collective future negotiation processes are based on *specific strategies of convention and non-calculation*. Exploring these strategies in practices shows how value and uncertainty are coupled with responsibility. This includes investigating the relationship between responsibility and engagement, the coordination of relevance, and the creative uses of uncertainty. Highlighting the activities of those writing scenarios as being *between writing and authoring*, the thesis argues that we need further research into the *conventions of engagement* in collective future orientation since foresight can be seen as a risky 'investment in non-calculation' whose value is still uncertain. Finally the thesis asks whether foresight and scenarios could be used to provide us with forms of coordination and engagement beyond the continuous demand for participation and relevance.