Media Review: Extrapolations – A View from OS4F

Scott Z. Burns
Extrapolations
USA: Apple TV+, 2023.

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As we draw inexorably closer to a two – and, more likely to a three – degree Celsius rise in global temperatures above pre-industrial levels, we, as members of OS4Future[1] feel increasingly compelled to raise awareness of the reality of the climate crisis. This topic has only recently gained more widespread examination by management researchers, drawing attention to questions of climate justice, problematizing short-term market incentives and the pressures for business as usual, or proposing prefigurative and more sustainable forms of organizing. Nonetheless, organization scholars, with few exceptions (e.g. Dentoni, 2024), still do not seriously entertain the possibility of severe disruption. This is a collective failure of imagination that requires different modalities besides scientific reports in order to convey the urgency of the situation.

One attempt to do so is the TV series *Extrapolations*. Set in the near future, but moving forward in time with each episode (from 2037 to 2070), the series exposes the viewer to a world experiencing accelerating ecological and societal collapse. Eight episodes offer distinct yet interconnected narratives of how different actors attempt to adapt – often unsuccessfully – to irreversible changes in their environment and communities. The series depicts a future of remarkable technological progress, yet one where little is accomplished to curb carbon emissions. As a result, wildfires, droughts, heatwaves and hurricanes envelop wide swathes of the planet and cause mass extinction of flora and fauna. The Arctic's ice caps have all but disappeared, while the world's oceans progressively become barren and acidified. Surging waters, held back in some areas by vast man-made dams, inundate other less fortunate coastal regions, creating millions of climate refugees. Villages are abandoned due to oppressive heat storms.

For organization scholars, the series is an attempt to convey the dystopian consequences of continuing 'business as usual', spurring action through affect and aesthetics rather than argument. The focus on individuals and communities grappling with the collapse of institutions, nature, organizations, values and relationships raises new questions for scholarly engagement. In this media review, we critically discuss three salient emotional themes undergirding the series. We believe these themes offer essential perspectives for advancing our current organizational

research, particularly in advocating for a more robust normative engagement with the harmful impacts of the climate crisis.

Misplaced Hope: How Techno-Optimism Obscures Alternative Approaches

A key debate in organization studies pertains to the inordinate faith placed in technology solutions (aligned with pro-market mechanisms) as a way to tackle climate change (e.g. Veal & Mouzas, 2012). The first half of the series features novel technologies such as desalination plants, automated solar-powered planes, global dimming technology and DNA cloning of extinct animals, all of which offer potential solutions to the climate crisis. As with our current world, many of these innovations are developed and promoted by consolidated commercial interests; as the series progresses, the reliance on those products and services becomes increasingly entrenched and difficult to reverse and, importantly, accessible to few. Innovation ultimately pivots towards individualized digital solutions, such as the storage of human memories and the digitalization of consciousness. Technology here becomes 'long-termist', where the present is seemingly abandoned to focus on the distant future.

Importantly, the series showcases the failures of techno-optimism when implementation is not accompanied by the requisite institutional, organizational and cultural transformations. *Extrapolations* deftly illustrates how technology ameliorates some local problems while creating myriad unintended systems-level consequences. These externalities impact how humans relate to both nature and each other; in fact, the technologies on the show undermine what it means to be human, with decision-making, memory and consciousness outsourced to digital platforms. An over-reliance on technology also crowds out the possibility of engaging in political and cultural changes that are necessary complements to technological solutions.

Such images of the future may guide significant questions for organization scholars today. Organization scholars could reflect further on what is needed to offset the hope in technological, market-oriented approaches to the climate crisis and how this crowds out other more democratic and sustainable solutions, such as regulation of – and behavioural changes around – consumption patterns. We could also examine what is needed to support sustainability, human dignity and other desirable values in a tech-mediated social infrastructure.

Disillusionment: The Inadequacy of Climate Governance

A key theme of *Extrapolations* is public disillusionment and frustration following organizational failures to respond to the climate crisis. A range of organizations – whether businesses, governments, research and religious organizations – struggle to recognize, much less act upon, the effects of a capitalist, carbon-dependent economy. Much of the inaction occurs at the levels of the state and transnational governance (Schüßler, Rüling, & Wittneben, 2014). In the first episode, the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) is mired in disagreements at the COP42 (Conference of Parties) meeting and cannot resolve basic issues around climate refugees and access to water.

Even when necessary regulatory measures are taken in the series, they echo the problematic (lack) of governance around climate change. Actions taken by rich nations in the show – for instance, a ban on geo-engineering – often impose burdens on developing countries. Ultimately, commercial interests come to dominate policy-making and governance, which occurs in tandem with the entrenchment of technological solutions. By depicting co-opted governments, the series

pushes us to critically reflect on what kind of governance mechanisms are needed to break the fossil fuel hegemony (Nyberg, Wright, & Bowden, 2022). For example, a citizen assembly model on climate policy, where a randomly selected sample of citizens are educated on climate issues and tasked with making binding recommendations, could help bypass corporate influence and partisan gridlock while ensuring more democratic representation in climate decision-making (Devaney, Torney, Brereton, & Coleman, 2020).

Organization scholars could further engage with the topic of disillusionment and fatalism in governance around climate action, and how to counteract these emotional responses. When democratically elected governments are unable to act, this erodes their legitimacy in the eyes of their populations, providing the basis for alternative orders – driven by market actors or populist movements – to emerge and fill in the governance gap (Roulet & Bothello, 2023).

Morality: The Ethical Complexity of the Climate Crisis

The series is also one that squarely focuses on moral dilemmas, whether at an institutional or individual level. The first episode, for instance, involves government officials at COP42 grappling with a fundamental question that both defines and stalls climate negotiations: how can global temperature increases be capped without burdening those who are already most affected by – and have contributed least to – the climate crisis? At an individual level, characters face difficult decisions in how they tackle the climate crisis: is radical action necessary even if it is undemocratic (episode 5)? Can a system be changed from within (episode 2)? Should one preserve the past or chart a new future (episode 6)? The series, while never offering resolutions to these dilemmas, takes us on a journey alongside various individuals who wrestle with these complexities in all the spheres of their lives.

Organizational scholarship has not sufficiently delved into the ethical dilemmas associated with the climate crisis, and the moral complexity involved in making system-level changes. In this area, we can ask: How can other ontologies inform us how to grapple with those fundamental ethical dilemmas? How can the lived experiences of those already impacted by the climate crisis teach us how to cope, innovate, adapt and live in a world full of destruction? Aside from this, while management and organizational scholars have increasingly engaged with concepts such as environmental justice, organizational research could increasingly study the organizational (historical) processes that create and maintain unequal distribution of environmental benefits and burdens (Foster et al., 2024).

Extrapolating from *Extrapolations*

The series could be seen as a wake-up call about the climate crisis. In some areas, it accomplishes this through, for instance, panoramas of burning forests and smog-covered cities, or stories of personal loss provide powerful images of a destructive future. In other areas, it falls short: *Extrapolations* misses a key opportunity to include a narrative of collective action against ecological collapse. Acts of resistance in the series are only taken by individuals; protests and demonstrations (and one incident of self-immolation) occur as an underexplored backdrop to some other events. Political mobilization – as we currently observe with movements such as Fridays for Future or Just Stop Oil – is a key driver of climate change accountability.

While certainly imperfect, *Extrapolations* is but one artistic expression needed to effectively – and affectively – convey a possible future if we do not act now on the climate crisis. It is an attempt to complement other formats that have proved powerful in mobilizing awareness through images, for instance, David Attenborough's *Planet Earth* series or Al Gore's *An Inconvenient*

Truth. The series does much to remind us that climate change is not merely an abstract concept, but a frightening reality. With its stark images and glimpses into day-to-day life in a heated world, the series offers organization scholars multiple avenues for further thought and, hopefully, also action. As one watches *Extrapolations*, it is disturbing to observe the capacity of humans to adapt and normalize an unravelling catastrophe. It is also unsurprising: after all, isn't this what we are already doing?

This review is dedicated to the memory of Helen Etchanchu, a founding member of OS4F who worked tirelessly to raise awareness of the climate crisis and change our individual and collective behaviours. She was an exemplar of an activist scholar.

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Note

1. OS4Future is a movement of organization and management scientists who wish to inspire fellow academics to take action on climate change. It focuses on actions that make a concrete impact along four dimensions: research, teaching, practice and leading by example.

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