

The future of tourism: interview with Nicole Ferdinand about Notting Hill Carnival Futures

Albert Postma and Nicole Ferdinand

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Abstract

Purpose – As the *Journal of Tourism Futures* celebrates its 10th anniversary, Dr. Albert Postma interviews Dr. Nicole Ferdinand (Oxford Brookes University Business School).

Design/methodology/approach – A personal interview.

Findings – The interview provides insights about the application of scenario planning for a mega event such as Notting Hill Carnival, how the process of scenario planning was experienced by the participants and the effect the study had on the Carnival, and how it was perceived in subsequent years.

Originality/value – Ferdinand shares her experiences with and learnings of the Notting Hill Carnival Futures project, conducted in 2013–2014 as first international project by the European Tourism Futures Institute.

Keywords Notting Hill Carnival, Scenario planning, Future of mega events, European Tourism Futures Institute (ETFI)

Paper type Viewpoint

Nicole Ferdinand

My name is Dr. Nicole Ferdinand. Currently, I am Deputy Associate Dean of postgraduate studies at Oxford Brookes University. I'm also the program leader for postgraduate study in hospitality, tourism and events management.

Albert Postma

What was the reason for the Notting Hill Carnival Futures project and what role did you play in the project?

Nicole Ferdinand

When I first started, my PhD studies focused a lot on the Carnival, specifically the Notting Hill Carnival, and its impacts for the UK economy and other economies that associate with this event.

I came to work with you on the Notting Hill Carnival Futures Project when I was approached by the organizers who were facing a sort of transition point for the event. There had been a change of management and they were looking for new ways to shape and take their event into the future. At that same time, it was also their 50th anniversary of the event, so they thought it was an opportune time to take stock and to see how they could take the event forward. At that time you were a professor of scenario planning and I thought you were the ideal person for me to approach to do some sort of project like this. So that is why we did the project.

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This paper forms part of a special section "10th Anniversary of the *Journal of Tourism Futures*", guest edited by Dr Stefan Hartman, Prof. Albert Postma and Prof. Ian Yeoman.

Albert Postma

What were the challenges the Notting Hill Carnival faced at the time?

Nicole Ferdinand

So at that time the main challenge I would say they were facing was the diversification of funding sources and looking for new ways to innovate the business model. The primary body from which they received funding, that's the Arts Council England, was cutting back on funding to organizations like those. The Notting Hill Carnival was looking at how they could innovate and reshape their business models so that it could diversify funding sources and perhaps also at the same time provide additional value to Arts Council England and either draw additional funding, or sustain their levels of funding in an increasingly competitive environment.

Albert Postma

Why did you think scenario planning could help with those challenges?

Nicole Ferdinand

I think one of the ways scenario planning could have helped with those challenges is that it would put the organizers in a kind of forward facing approach in looking at different business models that they could utilize rather than being locked into the past. The focus of previous reports and consultancies that were done for the Notting Hill Carnival tended to focus on questions such as: what happened in the past, what mistakes did you make before? A typical example is the often cited "Notting Hill Carnival: A Strategic Review published by the Greater London Authority in [2004](#).

Albert Postma

How did the idea of scenario planning land in the Carnival community? How did the community respond to the idea?

Nicole Ferdinand

I think the community at large responded very well to this idea, because they had grown weary and kind of jaded with previous approaches to other types of consultancy projects that were taken before, typically led by state bodies like the Greater London Authority for example. So I think you represented a new, a different type of approach, and I think that is why it got so much buy-in from the different stakeholders that got involved in project. It was gratifying to see that each of the cultural arenas that participated included statement of support in the final report Carnival Futures: Notting Hill Carnival 2020 published in 2013 ([Postma et al., 2013](#)).

Albert Postma

Yes, I remember the enthusiasm during the kick off meeting September 2012 at the High Commission for the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Later that month, together with the Carnival community, public and the experts, in three open and participatory sessions we mapped out the core values of the Carnival and we laid the foundation for four scenarios that were subsequently developed by the ETFI.

How did the participant experience the process?

Nicole Ferdinand

In terms of the actual experience of the process, when I reflect back on it, it was, I mean, we have the video for proof, right? I was very happy that King's College London, the funder of the project, made that video a deliverable.

So if you look back on it, what I notice is a lot of enthusiasm for the process and a lot of variety in terms of participants. A normal kind of consultation process I think focuses on a more narrow set of participants. What I liked about ETFI's process is that we also focussed on participants who could be engaged in future. So there were young people and they would not normally be part of a consultation process on an event like this that has a long history. It would more be about older people and people more, I don't know, traditionally associated with the community. I remember there were people of all races, all walks of life, all age groups – starting from probably 17/18 right up to maybe 75. So in terms of the process, I think it was really a kind of new way of approaching it and it generated a lot of enthusiasm and a lot of diversity in participation. That is what stood out to me most I think about the process, more than anything else. I remember a representative from the Trinidad and Tobago National Carnival Commission also attended scenario planning workshops and endorsed the approach. Subsequently, I was invited to contribute to a cabinet note which was to inform the investment in the Trinidad Carnival, it was entitled "Mas': A Technical Description" and it was published by National Carnival Commission in 2014.

Albert Postma

You already referred to the video that was made by the New Media Angels, but I wonder how the scenarios for the future of the Carnival were received?

Nicole Ferdinand

I remember keeping track of what actually was produced subsequent to that. So, one of the things that, when I think about it now, is the participants actually did what you are meant to do with these scenarios. They did not fall into the trap of focusing on one. They actually looked at all the scenarios and they looked at the merits and the disadvantages of all of them. So, I think they took the scenarios and the spirit in which they were intended, in that they were supposed to give them a kind of diverse range of ways of looking at how they could possibly shape the event for the future. So I think in that sense it was successful.

And yes, I think, the participants did find the scenarios realistic. They did ring true. They were plausible, and the ones that were, you know, least resembling the current manifestation of the event, I think they did find those provocative. It did give rise to kind of new ideas and new ways in which they could take things.

Albert Postma

What did they do with the outcomes of the study? Have there been any changes to the Carnival?

Nicole Ferdinand

So, when I look at the kind of manifestations of the Carnival post this scenario study, I saw the event go into surprising places. I saw shades of actually all the different scenarios being used to kind of enhance what was being offered. One of the really interesting things I saw was a hip hop dance group that was selected in one of the years immediately following the production of the scenarios to open Carnival. This is what we kind of imagined when we talked about one of the less familiar manifestations of the event, a Fusion Festival that would encapsulate all youth cultures of Britain. So that was something I thought that was interesting that happened afterward. The Evening Standard ran a great story about this: "Notting Hill Carnival 2015: bosses bang the drum for a new generation of revellers".

Another thing that I thought was interesting is that one of the mass bands collaborated with Transport for London. I found this great video on YouTube from [LondonLive \(2014\)](#) which explains this. One year they also had people in costumes show up in the London Underground creating kind of viral social media moments. Just randomly, you saw some people in costume show up in the

subway. I thought, yeah, that's not something that they would have normally done. So you saw kind of surprising, modern manifestations of the Carnival.

Some of the Carnivalists were attracted to the idea of it being an International Arts Festival, so showcasing a variety of artists during Carnival. If you go on the website now, what I notice is the official venues that they have are being used as part of the Carnival offer. So doing things like learning and workshops, showing films, photography exhibitions the like alongside the things that you would more associate with Carnivals. Notably, the official Notting Hill Carnival website: <https://nhcarnival.org/links> to the Tabernacle's (one of the organisation's featured venues) Website: <https://www.thetabernaclew11.com/> has a photo exhibition about the Notting Hill Carnival featured.

I also saw them going back to the roots. So now I see a lot of emphasis on the Sunday. They have this kind of traditional manifestation of the event that they have on the website as Dutty Mas. That is a celebration in which people cover themselves with materials to make themselves dirty. So mud, oil, paint, chocolate, et cetera. That's a big event now and something more from the traditional practice.

The other thing I saw as a kind of going back to their original focus, is a kind of engagement with social issues, if you remember the history of the founders. So when there was the fires at Grenfell Towers June 2017, a number of very poor people who were living in public housing, people from traditionally the type of communities who would have joined the Notting Hill Carnival, lost their lives in a terrible fire. So, I think the Notting Hill Carnival community used their event to highlight the issues around people living in public housing and, you know, the lack of attention to it, that probably caused these people to lose their lives. I remember being interviewed by Telsur in 2017 for a piece they published called "Carnival of Resistance and Resilience: How Notting Hill Can Help the People of Grenfell Heal" about this (see Grey, 2017).

So I saw shades of all the different scenarios, you know. All these scenarios kind of coming together in subsequent manifestations. The focus on youth and surprising things, the embracing of it being more like an international arts festival, and at the same time I saw them going back to the roots. I think that is a good thing because they used the scenarios to kind of diversify what they were doing, and they're still successful. It never has been suspended at any point in time since inception. To now they have managed to put on the event every single year.

Albert Postma

Has the study had an effect on the attitude by the Arts Council? Did the funding continue after all?

Nicole Ferdinand

In terms of how this study influenced the Arts Council England (ACE), I don't really see that. I mean in terms of immediate reactions of the Arts Council I think it was positive. Because they saw that the community was making an effort to engage with, you know, kind of a progressive move to shaping the Carnival.

When I look at what happened with the ACE subsequent to the research of the scenarios, I realize the consultation process had a few blind spots. There were forces in the environment that we did not see.

So a big force that we did recognize when we did this scenario consultation process was the importance of accessibility, and next the importance of technology. Digital forms of media kind of going hand in hand and making festival and events more accessible.

So when I look at the direction the ACE went into post these scenarios, they released a new kind of mantra for funding arts organizations under the umbrella of "Arts for All". So currently, ACE has four investment principles - the second principle is Inclusivity and Relevance. This is spelt out in the

2020–2030 Strategy (see [Arts Council England, 2021](#)). So a really heavy focus on accessibility, which was something that did not come up in these scenarios. Now, probably, those who engaged with this process and used it as an opportunity more broadly to think of things set differently, I think they would have gained from it from that point of view. I think the importance of accessibility kind of was around, but, to be honest, it was n't that big of an issue at that time. It really was n't very clearly visible at that time, but that's something that we missed and probably could have gone into these scenarios.

Albert Postma

What kind of accessibility are you referring to?

Nicole Ferdinand

It's all sorts of accessibility. One is financial, so making arts available to people who normally could not afford it or would be intimidated or not so easily participate in arts – these are the psychological barriers people have to consumption and participation. And also very importantly, physical accessibility. So making your events accessible to people with disabilities. I did see though that there were organizations who actually kind of reinvented their art forms to participate in these kind of new trends. But I think it's something we missed when we did the consultation.

Albert Postma

And could you clarify what you meant with digital technology?

Nicole Ferdinand

The importance of digital media, which had become really, really important, during COVID. During COVID Carnival was suspended for two years. Because of the public risk to health they didn't have Carnival, so digital format became a way to keep the event going. As I said, the Carnival has actually never missed a year since it's inception. That's not even a boast. I could speak of the original Carnival in my country, Trinidad, that we missed some years due to wars and things like this. Carnival in the UK has actually never missed a year and they were able to do that through kind of reconceptualizing the event using online formats and digital media. So I think that's something we could have probably looked at more, it could have come up more during the scenario sessions. I mean, it was around, but I don't think it was highlighted as such a big issue. A good account of how the Carnival coped during COVID-19 is provided by [Bakare \(2020\)](#).

Albert Postma

Has the study had an impact on raising awareness about developments in society and their potential effect on the future of the Carnival? Has it contributed to the conversation about its future?

Nicole Ferdinand

Yes, I think it made them more aware of the need for change, but at the same time, I think it also kind of shook up the organization and make them feel that we need to radically kind of reshape the organization.

So, the current head of Carnival now is a fairly young person. You still remember some of our older participants. You could see this person's clearly younger. He's kind of a combination of the scenarios in reflection. He's younger, but he's also Black British definitely, and he's a descendant of one of the original founders of the Carnivals. So he has a dual kind of mindset. He's a devotion to the traditional values, but at the same time he is very much contemporary, and has new ideas. Like, for example, he is the person that steered the Carnival through the COVID years. He gave a great

interview to the [Telegraph \(2020\)](#) about that saying that he felt that he just couldn't stop for two years because it was too important to too many people. So he found a new way to actually keep the Carnival going, and different types of business models too. One of the things I saw that they had partnerships with streaming platforms. I don't know how successful, financially, that would have been, but you could see clearly that there was a kind of commitment to doing things differently. That's the main thing that I saw after that project took place.

Albert Postma

Looking back, what lessons have been learned? What value did the scenario study have for the Carnival?

Well, you more or less covered that I think, but could you have a final say about that, if you would sum it up?

Nicole Ferdinand

What I think that's happened in terms of the lessons that have been learned is, I think, it added a new conversation about Carnival. Normally the conversations around Carnival are really around the history, the different art forms and things like this. There is not really a lot of conversation around business models, around things like scenario planning, strategy and things like this. So what I saw coming out of doing the scenario study is a new kind of discourse being developed around Carnival. In addition to the other, you know, more traditional discourses that normally take place.

Albert Postma

Does that also relate to, what would you call it, it maturing or professionalization of Carnivals? I seem to move a bit from the heart to the mind so to say?

Nicole Ferdinand

Yes, what I see is a kind of validation of the fact that actually, yes, the Carnival is a business. They need to consider questions of strategy and business models and do things like scenario planning exercises. So that's something I thought that was notable about this. Really, Albert, what you did was revolutionary. I do not know of any researcher that has engaged so many stakeholders of Carnival together in one project. There was not a group we missed, was there?

Albert Postma

Looking forward, given your expertise on mega events, I would like to put the Notting Hill Carnival Futures study into the broader context of the future of mega events. What value could scenario studies have for mega events in general?

Now, as you probably know, I kind of moved my research on and now I'm very much interested in mega events, especially those to do with sports.

So I think in terms of mega events, where I see scenario planning having kind of a revolutionary or transformative impact are those mega events that probably need a bit of a change with regard to certain issues. So for example, I think something like woman's football. As you know it is a continuous struggle for women's sports in general to get the levels of funding needed to even come close to matching the investment that they use in men's sports. So, in terms of mega events, I think scenario studies have a particular kind of transformative potential for those mega events that still kind of find themselves struggling or are underfunded; women's football is an example that comes to mind.

Scenario studies could also address certain types of issues in sports. So, if you were to apply this to an event like the Olympic games for example . . . I mean they keep changing this event over the years, but perhaps mega sporting events such as the Olympics could stand to engage with some wider issues. The huge issue now in the Olympics, it keeps going, is transgender women in sport.

So I think that's the way scenario studies really have potential. One, to address, to think more broadly about certain issues, and in terms to kind of transform sport that is struggling. So even like the Paralympics: can we think about this in a different way than we are currently framing it?

Albert Postma

My final question, what advice would you give to ETFI, based on your experience with Notting Hill Carnival Futures project?

Nicole Ferdinand

Concerning the project, the fact that we overlooked two issues probably highlights we needed to hit a wider range of stakeholders. A group that we probably could have targeted are people who are doing other community events, and it may have been an issue for those people.

Now in terms of ETFI generally I would like to say, really, ETFI has really amazed me in terms of what you have been able to achieve in a ten year period. The products that you offer is something not many other institutions can. The other thing is how you showcase what your expertise is and how quickly you can respond.

Albert Postma

Well Nicole, I would like to thank you very much for this interview.

Nicole Ferdinand

It's been great to catch up with you.

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