

Reprinted with permission from “The Signals Are Talking” by Amy Webb. Copyright 2016 by PublicAffairs, an imprint of Perseus Books, LLC, a subsidiary of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

## **THE SIGNALS ARE TALKING: Why Today's Fringe Is Tomorrow's Mainstream**

“Hello, Are You Lost?”

THE FUTURE DOESN'T simply arrive fully formed overnight, but emerges step by step. It first appears at seemingly random points around the fringe of society, never in the mainstream. Without context, those points can appear disparate, unrelated, and hard to connect meaningfully. But over time they fit into patterns and come into focus as a full-blown trend: a convergence of multiple points that reveal a direction or tendency, a force that combines some human need and new enabling technology that will shape the future...

README.TXT

This book contains a method for seeing the future. It's an organized approach that, if followed, will advance your understanding of the world as it is changing. Reading it, you will learn how to think like a futurist, and to forecast emerging trends as they shift from the fringe to the mainstream, and how to make better decisions about the future, today. If you are in any position of leadership—whether you're the CEO of a large corporation, a member of a nonprofit board, a mid-level human resources manager, a media executive, an investor, a chief marketing officer, a government administrator, a school superintendent, or the head of your household—you must strategically monitor trends and plan for the future. Failing to do so will put your organization and your future earnings at risk, but there are greater forces at work. If humans do not make a greater effort to understand the implications of our actions today, we are in danger of jeopardizing our own humanity.

I am a futurist, and I research emerging technology and forecast trends for a living. The term “futurology” comes from the Latin (futurum, or future) and the Greek suffix -logia (the science of), and it was coined by a German professor named Ossip Flechtheim in 1943,<sup>12</sup> who, along with author H. G. Wells several decades earlier,<sup>13</sup> proposed “futurism” as a new academic discipline. It's an interdisciplinary field combining mathematics, engineering, art, technology, economics, design, history, geography, biology, theology, physics, and philosophy. As a futurist, my

job is not to spread prophecies, but rather to collect data, identify emerging trends, develop strategies, and calculate the probabilities of various scenarios occurring in the future. Forecasts are used to help leaders, teams, and individuals make better, more informed decisions, even as their organizations face great disruption.

Technology is the unilateral source of nearly all of the significant things that have changed the world in the past five hundred years, including movable type, the sextant, the moldboard plow, the cotton gin, the steam engine, oil refining, pasteurization, the assembly line, photography, the telegraph, nuclear fission, the internet, and the personal computer. At some point, these were all mere fringe science and technology experiments.

This is not a book about technology trends per se, as a book of today's trends would be outdated and useless even before it came off the press. That's how fast the world is changing. A book that only offers a series of trends would force you to apply someone else's vision of the future to your own organization, industry, or market. Technology trends themselves—smartwatches, virtual reality, the Internet of Things—make for good media headlines, but they don't solve for the ongoing questions facing every organization: What technology is on the horizon? How will it impact our customers or constituents? How will our competitors harness the trend? Where does the trend create potential new partnerships or collaborators for us? How does this trend impact our industry and all of its parts? Who are the drivers of change in this trend? How will the wants, needs, and expectations of our customers change as a result of this trend?

To answer these questions, you need more than someone else's prognostications. You need a guided process to evaluate and adapt the pronouncements made by researchers, other businesspeople, and thought leaders within their professional spaces. You need a way to see the future for yourself.

The Signals Are Talking is a systematic way of evaluating new ideas being developed on the fringe that, at first blush, may seem too "out there" to affect you. But in every possible construct, our future is completely intertwined with technology, and as I discovered in Tokyo's Akihabara District14 in 1997, nothing in technology is ever really too esoteric that it doesn't deserve a few moments of attention. There is no possible scenario where technology does not play a significant role

in the years, decades, and centuries to come. Therefore, the trends we must track and the actions we put into place necessarily involve technology in some way.

The method in this book is made up of six steps. You can think of it as a set of instructions for the future—though this is no ordinary instruction manual. First, you must visit what I call the “unusual suspects” at the fringe. From there, you will uncover hidden patterns, connecting experimentation at the fringe to our fundamental human needs and desires. The patterns will reveal to you a possible trend, one you’ll then need to investigate, interrogate, and prove. Next, you’ll calculate the trend’s ETA and direction: Where is it heading, how quickly, and with what momentum? However, identifying a trend isn’t enough—as RIM discovered in 2008, when it attempted to launch its self-described “iPhone killer.” You must develop probable, plausible, and possible scenarios in order to create a salient strategy in the present. There is one final step: pressure-testing the strategy against the trend to make sure the action you’re taking is the right one.

The instructions are illustrated with stories that range from Sony being brought to its knees by hackers, even though company executives could have easily foreseen its future troubles, to the scientific community being shocked, and then outraged, when it learned that Dr. Ian Wilmut and his team had cloned a sheep named Dolly.

These and other stories may be familiar to you. But when we use the instructions to decipher the signals, what you see will start to seem quite strange. Your perception of present-day reality will, I hope, be challenged. You may even feel disoriented. But I feel confident that you will never interpret the world around you in quite the same way again.

Turn the page and listen closely. The signals are talking.