



INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE

HOW TO IDENTIFY A SIGNAL

prepared by
THE INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE
for
TryTank



A signal of change is a small or local innovation that suggests a different path for the future. Signals of change...

- Are a foundational data gathering practice within strategic foresight
- Provide the evidence and “building blocks” for plausible, provocative forecasts about possible futures
- Ground us in vivid details about new and unexpected experiences, uses of technology, social interactions, shifting values, business models, etc.
- Spark our curiosity and generate powerful stories about unexpected possibilities

a signal can be...

- A new product, service, or experience
- A business initiative
- An anecdote, personal observation, or behavior
- A research project or prototype
- A data point
- A news story
- **...but a general trend, or technology domain (like smart cities, or AI, or aging) is not a signal**
- **...and a forecast – something that may happen in the future – is not a signal**

how to identify a good signal

Signals, as used in strategic foresight, need to meet certain criteria:

- **CONCRETE** (a specific new product, behavior, event, data point, prototype, etc.)
- **CURRENT** (within the last 18 months or so)
- **COMPELLING** (gives you a quick, strong sense of awe, surprise, fear, or constructive confusion)

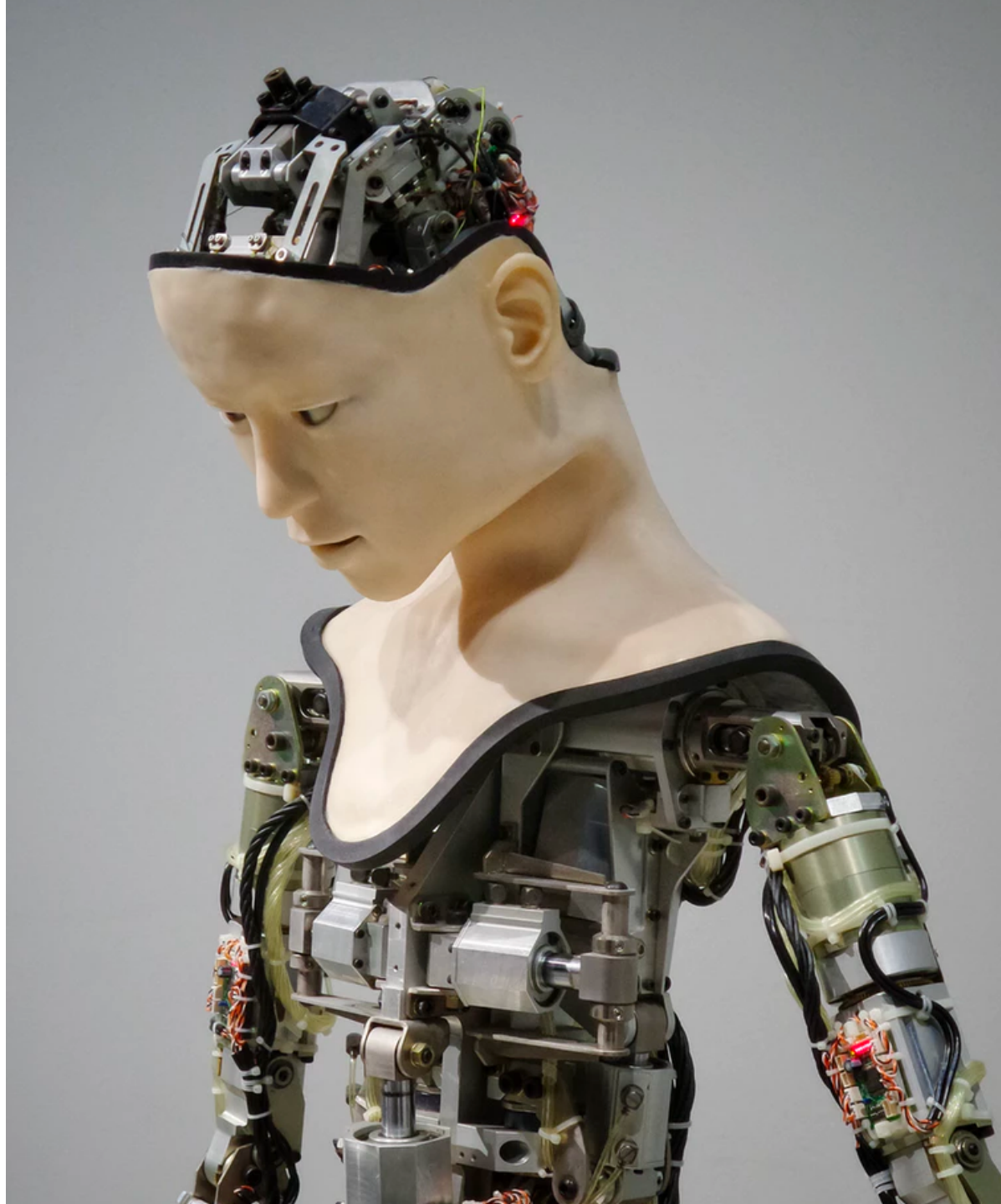
for each signal, ask yourself:

- **What** is the essence of the new behavior, technology, service, etc.?
- **So what:** What kind of future might emerge from this signal, if it were to scale? What is the story?
- **Source:** Make sure you keep track of where your signal comes from – this could be a tweet, a new study published in a scholarly journal, a headline grabbed from the newspaper, etc.

Example 1:

“Artificial Intelligence” is not
a signal.

It’s a broad, longterm driver
of change.



This is a good signal of artificial intelligence: a specific new application
(play video)



[source: New China TV](#)

signal:

Xinhua's AI news anchor

(from the video example on the previous slide)

WHAT?

China's state-run press agency Xinhua has created "AI news anchors" based on the likenesses of real reporters, to read the news.

SO WHAT?

Different types of organizations, like companies, government agencies, or criminal groups, could develop "characters" that look and sound like real people, but are AI-based. We might not know whether the speaker is the real person or the AI version.

Lots of jobs will be done by non-human AI characters.

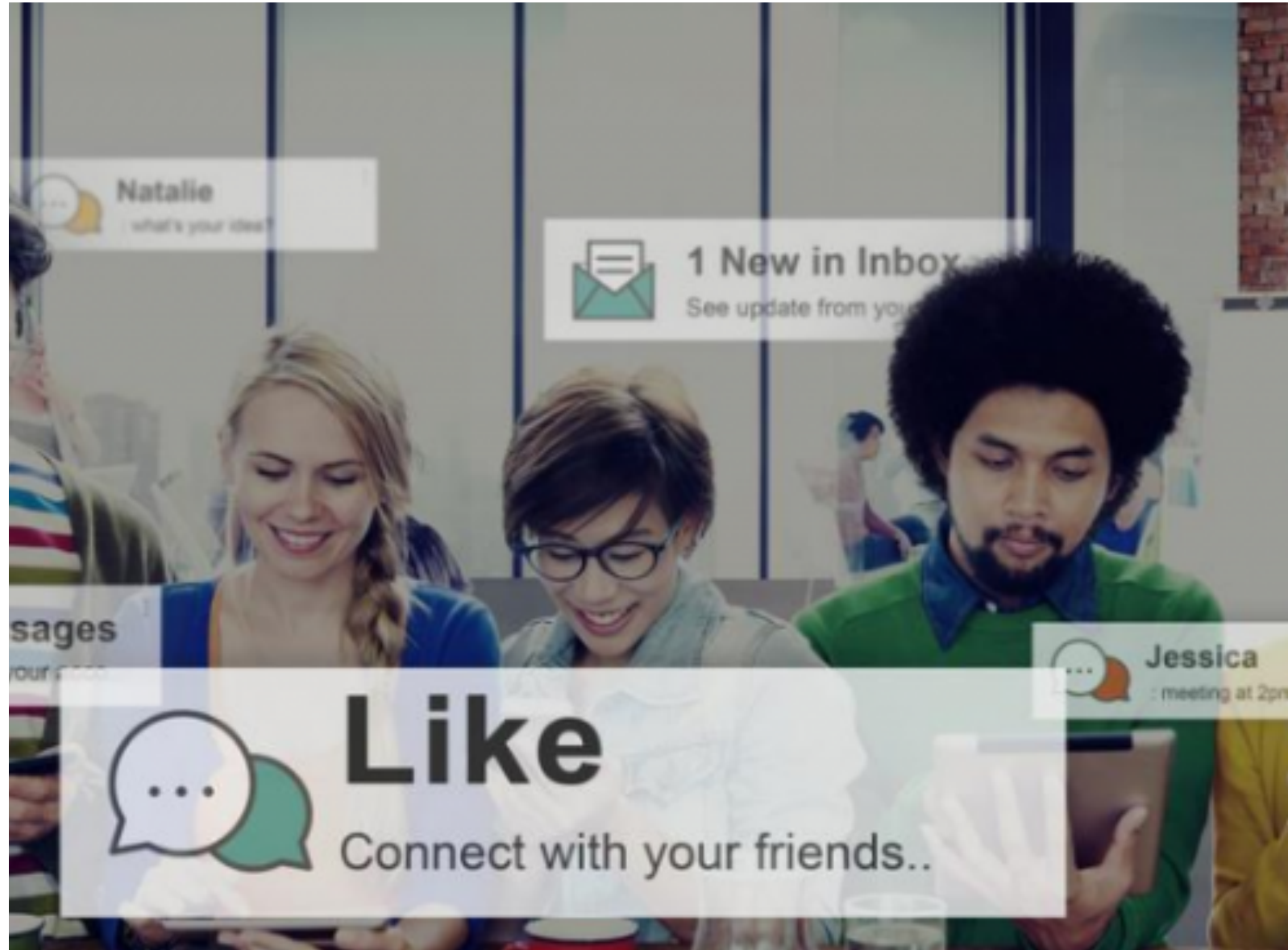
SOURCE:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eB29ZVDOfU>

Example 2:

“Digital natives” or “Gen Z” are not signals.

They are broad, longterm drivers of change.



signal:

AI voice assistants for kids



WHAT?

More than 4 in 10 parents (43 percent) in the U.S. say their 6- to 8-year-old children use voice-activated assistants for help with homework.

SO WHAT?

Voice activated AI helpers could become part of the normal daily study routine for kids.

This will influence the way kids think about how to learn and where information comes from. It could even shape how they interact with parents and teachers at home and in the classroom.

SOURCE:

<https://www.common sense.org/education/articles/compare-the-privacy-practices-of-the-most-popular-smart-speakers-with-virtual-assistants>

Find at least 1 signal with the potential to transform your organization's future

- Scan your environment via research and observation
- Choose signals that are relevant **for you**. These should be things that surprise you and point to really new directions of change.
- **Make sure your signal is as specific as possible** – not a broad trend.
- Describe each signal using these four components:

1 | **TITLE:** An evocative summary of the signal.

2 | **WHAT:** A brief explanation of what the signal actually is.

3 | **SO WHAT:** What kind of future might emerge from this signal, if it were to scale? What kinds of opportunities or challenges might it present?

4 | **SOURCE:** Where does your signal come from?

The following slides are optional templates you can use to organize your signals.

Title: _____

What:

So What:

Source:

Source: _____