

# The Flaming Torch Theory

Like a flaming torch in the hand, any new technology or scientific discovery can either light the way in the darkness, or burn the whole forest down. Often both. Therefore, any attempt at communicating new discoveries and technologies shares in the weight of that responsibility.

New technologies and discoveries – from nuclear weapons to the space race, the theory of evolution, vaccines, the iPhone, Climate Change or genetically modified food – can turn society on its head. And how we talk about it, really matters. This remains true as we enter the Fourth Industrial Revolution with Web3, AI, blockchain, human gene editing and whatever comes next. If you want to talk, post or write about potentially disruptive emerging technologies or new science to any wider audience, this field guide is for you.

## The 10 Tenets of Talking Tech:

- 1** New technologies and discoveries can sometimes deeply challenge what people believe, value or how they are used to living. If you think this may be the case, start the conversation about who will be affected how, as early as possible.
- 2** It will take decades for any new technology or discovery and all its impacts to be properly understood, so create an accurate sense of “where we are” currently. Mention what you know – what the top experts agree on – but also what might not be known yet. Try to think of the indirect impacts that might not be immediately obvious, but might ultimately be inevitable.
- 3** Don't label any technology or discovery as simply 'good' or 'bad' – any new tool can be used for building or breaking.
- 4** If you are discussing a big event concerning a new technology or discovery (like a high-profile announcement or a disaster), remember that such conversations help shape history, and what you say could influence people's ideas – or prejudices – long into the future.
- 5** It's important to have a balanced view, but if you are quoting people with opposing views, make sure they have some evidence for what they're saying. Don't quote or repeat/share/retweet something simply because someone has a loud voice, an entertaining theory, powerful political backing or the most followers.
- 6** Assume you're talking to people who know nothing about the technology or discovery in question and don't leave out any important context without which people might not have the full picture about the risks and benefits involved.
- 7** Learn as much as you can before you talk about a new technology or discovery, so that you don't end up spreading unnecessary fear, undue hype or misinformation.
- 8** Think about how different people will feel if a technology becomes commonplace in everyday life. (Automated taxis are cool, but maybe not for taxi drivers. Gene editing that can cure diseases is great – but not if only the super rich can afford it.) Ask yourself who will be the 'winners and losers'.
- 9** Learn to embrace the concepts of uncertainty and probability in science and technologies – it can be an exciting part of the story!
- 10** Think carefully about incentives. What kind of behaviour will a technology incentivise? How are people being incentivised to think and talk about it or use it? What are your own incentives to want to talk about this cool, risky new thing?

If we keep this in mind, we can help to avoid the pitfalls of history and carry the torch of discovery with care and confidence!

*Fanie (RS) van Rooyen, PhD*

This field guide is based on the Flaming Torch Media Ethics Theory and its underlying Ten Tenets. Click or use the QR code to read the full theory:

