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The smart era

AI can make us better researchers, and maybe even more intelligent. But its power needs to be shared for the common good

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TECHNOLOGY / AI / EDUCATION

OPENING ARGUMENT

James Rice is a PhD student at the University of Essex, where his research explores the political impacts of climate change misinformation.

OVER THE PAST DECADE, the idea that advanced AI and machine learning could enhance our collective intelligence has shaped the development of the technology as a tool for research.

Research teams are embracing AI systems for tasks as varied as data analysis and write-ups. Meanwhile companies are developing tools specifically with research in mind, with recent releases coming from the likes of OpenAI and Google Gemini.

The big question is whether this trend truly makes us smarter as researchers or simply accelerates the pace of inquiry without answering deeper questions about agency and ownership. After all, if the democratisation of AI can indeed put powerful research tools in more people's hands, there's also a risk that expertise and decision-making authority could be monopolised by AI itself, leaving researchers disenfranchised.

As a postgraduate research student, I spend my days running machine learning models on large social science datasets, including extensive exploration of the latest LLM capabilities. Despite the changes that AI is expected to bring to the field, I believe that using these tools will make us more intelligent. We must channel new capabilities responsibly, creatively, and in service to the common good.

01 / AUGMENTED INQUIRY

AI, growth and expertise

Machine learning and AI are no longer confined to narrow applications like optimising web searches or automating factory lines. Today, they stand at the forefront of efforts to reshape how we conceptualise, conduct and share research.

This pivot toward AI is particularly visible in knowledge-intensive tasks. LLMs are widely used today in the social and natural sciences, mathematics, and even qualitative research, and they promise to become much more powerful in the years to come. At the same time, the role of human expertise remains central. In the future, AI will drive not only economic growth, but also personal and professional empowerment and fulfilment. Far from replacing researchers, AI appears poised to augment their capacity for critical thinking and innovation.

02 / ACCESS AND POWER

Economics of the fourth Industrial Revolution

Economists have long studied the effects of disruptive technologies on labour, productivity and society. Joseph Stiglitz, noted for his work on the economics of information, warns that asymmetrical access to advanced tools can create new forms of inequality. Daron Acemoglu, famous for his research on how automation reshapes the workforce, emphasises that AI will bring shared prosperity on an unprecedented level.

Progress within intellectual work will increasingly depend on equality and fairness of access to new digital research tools. If the "intelligence revolution" is to enhance our capacity for creativity and knowledge, we must find new outlets for the abilities we possess. The new range of cognitive and physical AI tools should be widely accessible, otherwise we risk sequestering and restricting both power and intelligence. Unrestrained AI could become a new digital elite whose decisions shape research agendas and resource allocation.

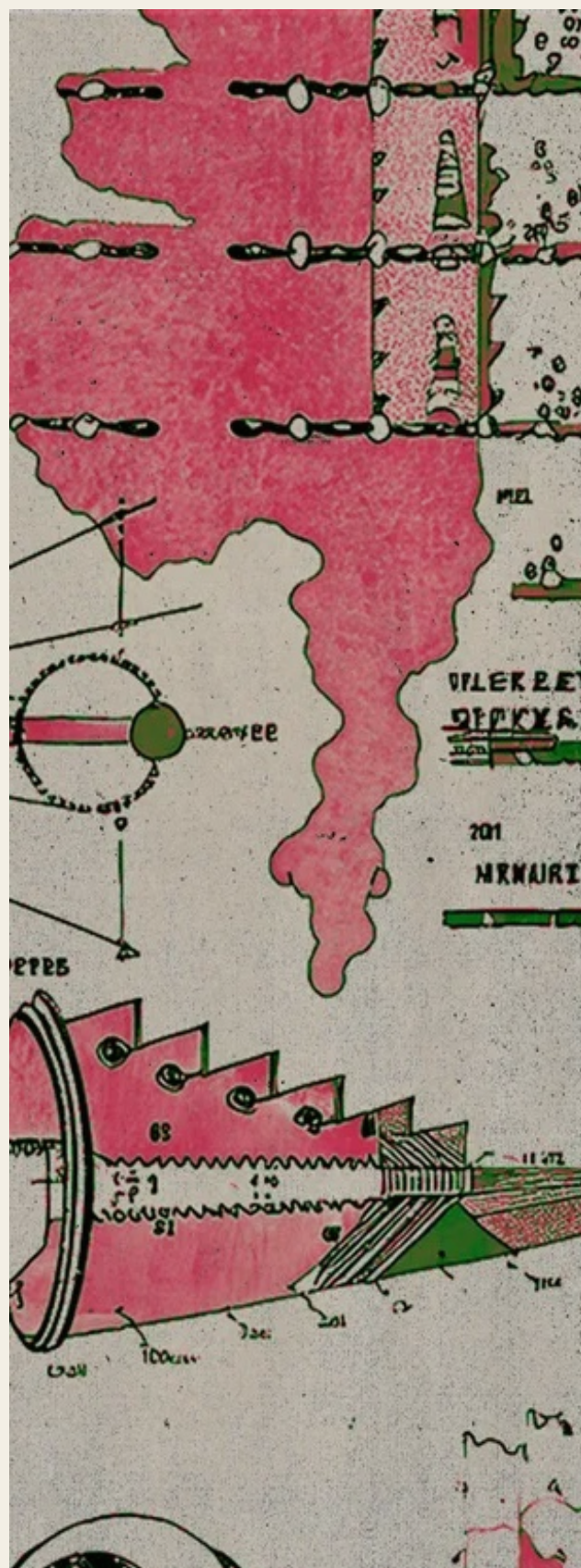
03 / WHAT PEOPLE STILL DO BEST

Human agency's capacity for innovation

As Nick Bostrom said in a now famous 2015 TED talk, “machine intelligence is the last invention that humanity will ever need to make.” By automating the process and the practice of science, research, innovation, and creative production are we not creatively destroying the structure of human knowledge in a Schumpeterian fashion, only to rebuild it with machine intelligence?



Just as open-source software revolutionized coding, open-access AI platforms can democratise research

**HUMAN AGENCY**

CONTEXT / ETHICS / CREATIVITY

03 / CONTINUED

Human agency's capacity for innovation

Daron Acemoglu points out that while AI can handle massive data parsing, human researchers excel in contextual reasoning, ethical considerations and creativity. By uniting these strengths, we can move beyond mere efficiency gains toward entirely new forms of inquiry. Acemoglu has said that “we currently have the wrong direction for AI. We're using it too much for automation and not enough for providing expertise and information to workers.”

Still, the risk of automation overshadowing human skill development looms. The challenge is to harness the benefits of AI while ensuring that new tasks are created that humans are needed for.

04 / GOVERNANCE IN PRACTICE

Responsible creation and use of information

The promise of AI-driven research hinges on how responsibly we create, use, and consume new knowledge. As a recent article in the Harvard Business Review has observed, “While many organizations have made strides in developing AI principles, the real challenge lies in embedding these principles into the fabric of daily operations. Leaders, particularly those in nontechnical roles, are instrumental in this process, advocating for practical resources, fostering a culture that values ethical AI, and ensuring that responsible AI practices are a fundamental aspect of decision-making.” While self-regulation is a start, many experts argue that formal oversight mechanisms are necessary, given how quickly AI is evolving and how high the stakes are.

Ethical, rigorous, scientific work will not vanish, instead it will evolve, with leaders integrating AI within the research and discovery pipeline.

05 / NEW ROLES, UNEQUAL TRANSITIONS

The future of the research workforce

As AI advances, concerns about workforce displacement surface. Historically, though, new technologies have tended to reshape labour markets rather than simply eliminating jobs. AI may reduce the need for routine tasks like data entry and literature reviews, but in doing so it could create new roles: AI ethicists, data curators, model auditors, and “human-in-the-loop” specialists ensuring quality and ethical standards.

Still, the transition won't be frictionless. Without deliberate efforts to broaden access, smaller institutions and individuals who are not capable of using AI could be left behind. Just as open-source software revolutionized coding, open-access AI platforms can democratise research. But that requires investments in infrastructure and education, as well as institutional willingness to share data and model architectures rather than guarding them as proprietary secrets.

06 / A HUMAN DIRECTION

Towards an AI society

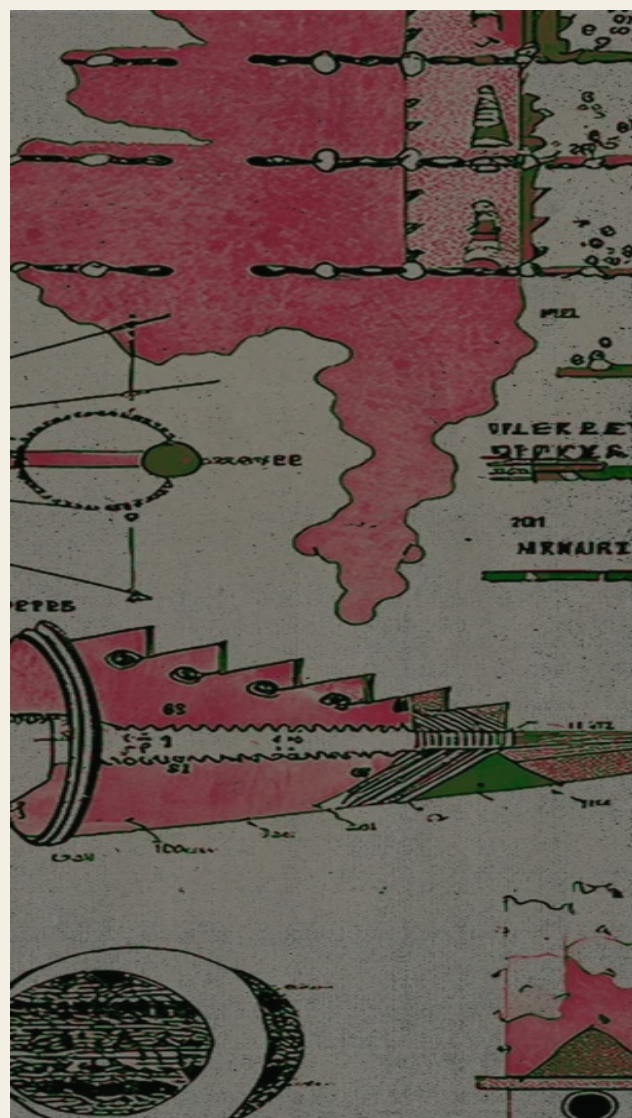
Ultimately, AI absolutely will make us more intelligent - provided we rise to the challenge of implementing it ethically, distributing it equitably, and blending it with the existing strengths of the human capacity to think and reason, morally and creatively. Simultaneously, we can ensure that the next generation of researchers are able to make ethical decisions as they leverage these powerful new tools we have built to produce knowledge.

In one sense, the most precise answer to “Does AI make us more intelligent?” is that it undoubtedly will - but only if we commit to guiding and shaping it with vision, responsibility, and humanity. Finally, we must preserve what makes human intelligence unique: our moral reasoning, emotional intelligence and empathy, and our capacity for novel invention and global vision. AI may help us understand the good life, but it cannot live that life in our place.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Rice is a first-year PhD student at the University of Essex, where his research explores the political impacts of climate change misinformation. With master's degrees from the London School of Economics and the University of Edinburgh, James specialises in applying advanced quantitative methods to understand how public discourse affects climate policy effectiveness and sustainability efforts.

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**VISION.
RESPONSIBILITY.
HUMANITY.**

TOWARDS AN AI SOCIETY