

## From fear to Utopia: A vision of AI's positive potential

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With each technological leap, our innate fear of change emerges. AI, the latest in a long line of disruptive breakthroughs, follows a pattern seen in history. The invention of the printing press sparked fears that religious teachings would be undermined, with condemnation of the new books as ‘the devil’s work’.

Even the invention of the telephone caused a moral panic that it would bring down society by removing the need for people to meet face-to-face. Today’s AI debate echoes this fear. The headlines from last year’s landmark Bletchley Park conference screamed about [‘killer robots’](#), and [‘existential threats to humanity’](#).

However I’m hopeful the opposite is the case. AI has the power to do something quite profound and support the flourishing of humanity. Paradoxically freeing us from many of the bonds of the most recent wave of attention-sapping digital technology. So how do we get there?

The age of technology distraction

Perhaps the last few years have boosted the arguments of the technophobes. The advent of ‘social’ media having a negative impact on our social functioning and flourishing. The more digitally connected we are, the less real-world human contact we are experiencing.

So much technology is designed to capture our attention and keep us on a platform for as long as possible. To help these companies gather data and/or display advertising to drive their revenue for shareholders.

But it is vital for our wellbeing to spend time with each other, and crucial that we have time to think and

dream without distraction to solve problems. After all, as Robert Waldinger writes about in [The Good Life](#), humans evolved to be connected to other humans.

#### The decline of real time

This information loaded, hyper-connected world has left us with little time to just exist. Time to daydream, to contemplate, to think creatively and solve problems which are right in front of us. This is leading to reduced innovation, stress and burnout.

It is also making us feel isolated. [A 2018 study by the University of Chicago](#) found that people who use social media frequently are more likely to feel isolated and less satisfied with their lives.

While some fear that AI, as the next big technological breakthrough, may enslave us further, it also has the potential to help us reclaim our time and mental space as a species.

#### Dramatically improving productivity

At the most basic level, AI can automate and optimise low value, but high time intensity tasks, to free up time for real world experiences and reflection. The recent evidence indicates that AI can save employees an impressive amount of time.

[One study on the impact of generative AI](#) on highly skilled workers finds that when artificial intelligence is used within the boundary of its capabilities, it can improve a worker's performance by as much as 40% compared with workers who don't use it. This potential for productivity improvement would be unmatched since the Industrial revolution. This would bolster economic performance and provide people with more freedom and time.

#### Nurturing creativity and connection

Unlike social media platforms designed to distract you from other aspects of life, AI can be 'additive' to real life and connection. AI can help humans generate new ideas and explore possibilities by providing the accumulated knowledge of humanity at the click of a button. And that is worth noting.

AI is not something alien or somehow anti-human, it is in fact all of humanity's knowledge, vectorised and summarised. This democratising technology enables us all to stand on the shoulder of giants to support new ideas, creativity and innovation.

#### Realising the Utopian promise of technology

Ultimately these gains could emancipate humans and offer the Utopian dream technology always was always supposed to offer. To reduce our working time, and spend more time doing the things that provide meaning and with the people we love.

Indeed despite fears, technological breakthroughs have often facilitated human creativity and interaction. The birth of the Arts was caused by the beginning of the Industrial revolution as we shifted from an agricultural society working round the clock to a 9-5 existence. This freed up the most precious commodity of all time.

With the additional hours in our day, we now had time to engage in passions and hobbies. This is the human flourishing we should be aiming for as AI develops.

The solution to humanity's biggest challenges in sight

The promise of AI and humanity's accumulated wisdom also means the biggest challenges we face could be within our grasp. Not as Elon Musk fears [to support environmental extensionists](#) but to manage humanity's transition to net zero, discovering effective methods at scale for alleviating poverty and finally curing cancer.

Already there have been remarkable breakthroughs with [Ground-breaking artificial intelligence](#) helping clinicians diagnose lung cancer quickly and accurately being rolled out in NHS hospitals. But we are only at the beginning of this journey.

What do we need to watch out for and how do we make it a reality?

Of course it would be naïve to suggest AI doesn't require guardrails. There are five key areas that can help ensure we shape AI in a positive direction to help us realise these goals and minimise the risks.

#### Ethical guidelines and regulation

Guidelines and regulation can help to ensure AI is used ethically for good, not bad and that we are able to tackle rogue players. Navigating the ethical landscape of artificial intelligence involves grappling with the challenge of establishing universally agreed-upon ethical guidelines and regulations.

#### Human-centric design

Looking into the heart of AI's impact on humanity, the concept of human-centric design is a critical consideration. It addresses the fundamental question of the role of humans in the age of AI. If it is going to replace existing jobs, how is it going to otherwise benefit us and support our life or mental wellbeing?

Defining outcomes aligned with human values and creating a vision that preserves human-centric goals are pivotal. Of course these need to be balanced with the requirements of the planet.

#### Public education and awareness

The success of AI integration hinges on the public's understanding and acceptance of its goals and outcomes. The journey toward widespread comprehension is fraught with challenges, as diverse perspectives may lead to resistance. Education and awareness thus become key elements in mitigating potential conflicts.

A tough prospect in today's divided world. This divide is influenced by a failure to fully educate people on the impact of social media platforms on debate and discourse. Let's not make the same mistake again.

#### Economics and global collaboration

As AI's capabilities render certain jobs obsolete and alter the landscape of work, reimagining economic structures becomes imperative.

The prospect of universal income and the potential reshaping of consumer-driven economies loom large. Addressing these challenges on a global scale is paramount, as attempting to change economic systems in isolation risks unintended consequences in an interconnected world.

#### Mental health and social well being

Beyond the economic and regulatory realms, the transformative power of AI extends to the very fabric of human existence. The societal shift needed to prioritise mental health and wellbeing aligns with the

broader theme of human-centric AI. The newfound time afforded by AI will make us consider how we can fill our lives with meaningful activities.

While much of technology takes us away from our roots and nature, we now have the potential for increased interaction with nature. AI can offer the potential for holistic impact on mental health and social well-being, steering society towards a more balanced and fulfilling existence.

If we don't fully appreciate and aim for these benefits how can we hope to bring the best from AI? Let's ensure this next big leap in human technology helps create a better world through better health, stronger bonds between people and a life filled with dreams and innovation.