

**this is not my
beautiful future.**

THIS IS NOT MY BEAUTIFUL FUTURE

We spent centuries building machines to overcome human limits. Artificial intelligence may finally force us to decide which limits were the problem—and what all this progress was for.

There is a moment in Talking Heads' *Once in a Lifetime* when David Byrne's bewildered narrator seems to wake up inside his own existence and wonder how he arrived there. Released in 1980, the song captured something larger than suburban dislocation: the strange experience of discovering yourself inside a life shaped by systems you participated in but never quite directed.

Nearly half a century later, we might ask the same question of the world we have built. We carry much of recorded human knowledge in our pockets, speak across oceans without thinking about distance, ask machines to turn ordinary language into software, watch robots learn physical tasks and encounter convincing images of people and places that never existed. Things that belonged to science fiction within living memory have become mundane enough to annoy us when they are slow.

So, with a respectful nod to Byrne, how did we get here?

The usual answer is a procession of inventions—steam, electricity, the automobile, television, computing, the internet, the smartphone, artificial intelligence—but that is the catalogue, not the story. The deeper history of technology is humanity trying to escape constraint. We wanted more power than our bodies could produce, so we built machines; more things than hands could make, so we built factories. We wanted to travel faster, defeat distance and make knowledge widely accessible, so we built engines, wired the planet and eventually put the network in our pockets. Now we want more intelligence than human beings alone can provide, so we are building that too.

For most of this history, progress had a reasonably clear direction because scarcity provided the compass. More food meant less hunger, more medicine meant longer lives, more energy expanded productive capacity and more information widened access to knowledge. More was not simply consumption; at its best, it was liberation from constraint.

Success, however, changes the problem. When production becomes abundant, demand matters more. When information becomes abundant, attention becomes scarce. When everyone can publish, distribution gains power. When everyone can create, selection becomes valuable. When answers become cheap, better questions become expensive. As useful machine cognition becomes cheaper and more widely available, the question changes again.

The defining challenge of the AI age may have surprisingly little to do with how intelligent machines become. It may be whether humans become any wiser about what intelligence is for.

We invented power. Then power reinvented us.

The steam engine is remembered as a machine, but its larger product was a different civilisation. Before industrialisation, production was constrained by muscle, animals, land,

weather and locally available energy. Mechanical power loosened those constraints, factories grew, people moved towards them, cities expanded, capital followed infrastructure and work reorganised around industrial time. The machine did not simply make the existing world faster; it changed the logic by which the world organised itself.

Electricity repeated the pattern. Its greater value emerged not from replacing one source of power with another while leaving everything else untouched, but from allowing factories themselves to be redesigned. This is the recurring mistake of technological revolutions: we encounter a new capability and ask what old thing it can replace, when the larger opportunity is to ask which old assumption no longer needs to exist.

Industrialisation eventually became so effective at making things that another constraint emerged. Production was no longer the only problem because someone had to want what the factories could produce. The industrial economy therefore helped create another machine: consumer culture.

We learned to manufacture things. Then we learned to manufacture desire.

Mass production did more than lower the cost of goods; it helped reorganise culture around consumption. The automobile transformed mobility and then cities, infrastructure, retail, energy and our relationship with place. Radio and television assembled millions of strangers inside the same cultural moment. Recorded music separated performance from presence, while advertising turned aspiration into an industry.

Culture responded in ways the machinery could never fully control. Rock and roll disturbed polite society, the counterculture challenged inherited authority, punk made amateurism a weapon and hip-hop turned neglected streets and repurposed technology into a new cultural language. MTV collapsed music, fashion, advertising and identity into global spectacle.

These were not decorative side effects of technological progress. Every important medium changes who gets to speak, who gets heard and who gets paid. Technology changes what can be expressed, markets determine what can be distributed, and culture decides what acquires meaning before changing the market all over again. Pop culture is not simply a mirror held up to history; it is one of the forces moving it.

Then the machine disappeared.

I began working as a software engineer when computers still announced themselves as computers. You went to the machine and learned its language. Storage was expensive, connectivity constrained and being online was somewhere you went rather than a condition of being alive.

Then computing began disappearing into ordinary life. The personal computer put calculation on the desk, the internet connected the desks, cloud computing moved much of the machinery somewhere else, and the smartphone collapsed the camera, map, telephone, newspaper, television, music player, marketplace and computer into a slab of glass we stopped noticing because it was always there.

The consequence was larger than convenience because digital technology began dissolving distance. Creators could reach audiences without printing presses, software companies could distribute globally without physical media, merchants could reach customers without shops on every high street and communities could form without geography. Old gatekeepers weakened, but new ones appeared as search engines organised information, marketplaces organised commerce, social networks organised relationships and app stores organised software distribution. The internet looked decentralised from the edge while power often accumulated in the middle.

There is a lesson here that technological utopianism repeatedly forgets: democratising capability does not democratise outcomes. Someone still owns the infrastructure, designs the incentives, controls access to demand and writes the rules of the new world while everyone else is marvelling that it arrived.

We connected everyone. Then we put everyone in competition.

The smartphone did more than put a computer in every pocket; it put every pocket inside the market. Empty moments became reachable, anyone could publish and every publisher could measure. Behaviour became data, experience became content and attention became inventory. Information, once expensive to create and distribute, became effectively inexhaustible while human attention remained stubbornly finite.

The feed became an allocation system for consciousness, a machine deciding which fragment of reality should occupy which mind next. That description would once have sounded dystopian; we came to call it engagement.

The consequences were not uniformly bleak. Movements organised outside established institutions, marginalised voices found audiences and knowledge escaped old boundaries. Yet the same infrastructure that distributed solidarity could distribute conspiracy, and the machinery capable of discovering the song you loved could also discover the grievance most likely to keep you watching. We built systems extraordinarily good at learning what captures human attention before deciding whether everything capable of capturing it deserved amplification.

The failure was not optimisation itself. We had failed to specify what optimisation was for, and AI gives us another chance to make the same mistake at much greater scale.

Now the machine speaks back.

Artificial intelligence crosses a boundary previous digital technologies mostly did not. The machine no longer merely stores, calculates, retrieves and distributes human creation; it increasingly participates in creating words, images, video, software, designs, analysis, research and decisions.

The systems remain imperfect. Fluency is not truth, prediction is not understanding and synthetic competence is not human consciousness, but none of that removes the economic consequence. Useful cognitive capabilities that once required significant human effort can increasingly be produced or approximated by machines at extraordinary speed and falling marginal cost.

I saw an early version of this while leading a creative innovation business as generative AI began altering production economics. The obvious opportunity was efficiency: produce existing work faster and cheaper. That opportunity was real, but it was also the least interesting part, because once everyone can make more, making more stops being the advantage.

The question moves from whether we can make something to whether it deserves to exist; from generating an answer to deciding which answer deserves trust; from creating more content to making anyone care; from automating work to asking why the work was organised that way in the first place. AI does not abolish scarcity so much as move it, and when a foundational capability becomes abundant, value does not disappear with the scarcity. It migrates towards whatever remains difficult.

When answers become cheap, questions become expensive.

This is why much of the corporate response to AI feels strangely familiar: take the organisation we already have and make it faster by putting copilots into workflows, agents into processes, generation into marketing and automation into service. There will be enormous productivity gains from doing exactly that, but productivity is not transformation.

The more consequential question is what happens when the constraint that created the organisation disappears. Why does a workflow have seven stages, information travel through four management layers or customer service begin only after a customer has a problem? Why does marketing organise itself around campaigns when personalised creation can become continuous? Why does software pricing reflect an era when software capability was expensive to produce?

The dangerous question is not where we can put AI, but **what we would never build this way if we were starting now.**

A company that automates the existing system may reduce cost. A company that redesigns itself around the disappearing constraint can alter speed, customer experience, pricing, cost-to-serve and organisational scale together. That distinction—between improving yesterday's machine and questioning whether it should still exist—is where much of the next era's enterprise value will be created.

The spectacle can now manufacture itself.

There is a stranger consequence beyond productivity. For much of the twentieth century, media mediated reality: we experienced distant wars through television, celebrities through magazines and aspiration through advertising. Social media then collapsed the distinction between participant and spectator until we began producing the spectacle ourselves.

Generative AI completes another turn because representation is becoming economically detached from experience. Photography once required something to photograph, recorded speech required a speaker, journalism required an act of reporting, and advertising usually began with something that existed before it could be represented. Those dependencies are weakening.

An image need not record a moment, a voice need not belong to its speaker, a personality need not belong to a person and convincing evidence may describe something that never occurred. The spectacle can increasingly manufacture itself, and that changes the economics of the real.

When simulation becomes cheap, provenance becomes valuable; when imitation becomes convincing, authenticity acquires a premium; when content becomes infinite, presence matters more; and when machines can produce endless variations of the statistically plausible, taste becomes the ability to reject almost all of them. This is more than a cultural reaction against artificiality. It is value migration again, from producing the representation towards establishing why anyone should believe it, experience it or care about it.

The age of generative abundance may therefore increase the value of distinctly non-generative things: authorship, accountability, reputation, physical presence, lived experience, human relationships and trust. When almost anything can be simulated, reality becomes a premium product.

Intelligence lives in the cloud. Power does not.

Artificial intelligence feels weightless because its interface is language, but its infrastructure is anything but. Behind the prompt sit semiconductors, data centres, cooling systems, transmission networks, land and electricity. As demand for AI grows, the physical resources required to produce machine intelligence become strategically important: compute, energy, grid capacity, chips, infrastructure, capital and permission to build.

The cloud hid the computer; AI reveals the power station. The digital economy therefore folds back into the physical world, turning apparently software questions into questions of industrial policy, geopolitics, supply chains and capital intensity.

Every form of abundance has a bill somewhere, and the apparent magic of machine intelligence remains stubbornly dependent on electrons, concrete and geography.

Whose beautiful future is this?

Technological progress has never distributed its benefits automatically. Industrialisation generated extraordinary prosperity alongside brutal working conditions before institutions responded. Mass media broadened access to culture while concentrating distribution. The internet opened publishing to billions while producing immensely powerful intermediaries.

AI contains the same contradiction. Some work will become more productive, some will change and some will disappear, but the distribution of the gains will not be decided by model architecture. It will depend on who owns the systems, who controls distribution, who bears displacement and who captures the productivity.

If small teams can build companies with capabilities that once required much larger organisations, entrepreneurship may become more accessible while wealth becomes more concentrated. If personalised education becomes extraordinary, opportunity could broaden—or advantage could compound around those with access to the best systems. If machines perform more economically valuable work, we may eventually have to reconsider a social settlement that binds income, status and identity so tightly to employment.

These are not arguments against the technology. They are reminders that technology changes the distribution of power as surely as it changes the distribution of capability. Technology does not remove politics; once it becomes consequential enough, it becomes political.

More was a good idea.

There is a temptation to blame progress itself, but that would be lazy. More mattered because more food, sanitation, medicine, energy, literacy, mobility, information and opportunity relieved hunger, disease, ignorance, isolation and physical exhaustion. Romanticising scarcity is easiest when you are not experiencing it.

The moral power of *more*, however, came from what more relieved. As those constraints change, the meaning of progress must change with them. A society drowning in information does not necessarily need more information, just as a company capable of producing a thousand ideas does not necessarily need a thousand and one, or a person reachable every second of every day greater connectivity.

A civilisation capable of optimising almost anything eventually has to decide what should not be optimised. For centuries, progress meant increasing capability because the deficit was obvious. The next definition must include discernment because capability alone no longer tells us which direction is forward.

A beautiful future should still look used.

Imagine, then, not technological utopia but technological maturity: cities that consume less than they regenerate, cleaner and more abundant energy, materials designed for reuse rather than disposal, manufacturing that wastes less, education in which abundant information makes curiosity and judgement more important, and healthcare increasingly capable of understanding the individual rather than only the statistical average.

Imagine machines doing more dangerous, repetitive and dehumanising work while people have more time for care, invention, relationships, craft and the wonderfully unnecessary things that make life worth living. This is not an argument for perfection, which is a terrible design brief for humanity, but for using greater technological capability to enlarge rather than diminish the experience of being human.

A beautiful future should still contain arguments, accidents, bad poetry, second chances, graffiti, eccentricity, wasted afternoons, music played too loudly, things made badly by hand and people doing economically irrational things because they love someone. Not every friction is a bug; some friction is where meaning lives.

The ambition should be to automate drudgery without accidentally automating away the parts of life that made liberation from drudgery worth pursuing.

The companies that understand this will build differently.

This sounds philosophical until capital has to be allocated, at which point it becomes strategy.

Every major technological transition changes the location of scarcity, and scarcity helps determine where defensible value can accumulate. Industrial machinery reduced the scarcity of production and increased the importance of demand. The internet reduced the scarcity of distribution while increasing the importance of attention, discovery and trusted aggregation. AI is reducing the cost of many cognitive and creative capabilities, which means value will migrate again.

Access to machine intelligence alone cannot sustain advantage if comparable capability is available to every serious competitor. Durable advantages will form around what remains difficult to reproduce: proprietary context, customer relationships, distribution, trust, workflow position, brand, judgement and the ability to turn possibility into outcomes people value.

If creation becomes cheaper, producing more becomes less impressive and learning what deserves to be built becomes more valuable. If generic answers become abundant, businesses need to move closer to consequence through trusted decisions, embedded workflows, accountable outcomes and measurable customer value. If automation removes work but preserves the bureaucracy built around it, the organisation has digitised its history rather than redesigned its future.

That leads to a more useful boardroom question than asking whether a company has an AI strategy: **if everyone has access to the same underlying capability, why will we still win?**

The strongest businesses will know where machines should create abundance and where humans create disproportionate value. They will use technology to remove constraints without allowing technological capability to become a substitute for customer value, commercial judgement or purpose. Technology changes what is possible; markets still decide what matters.

And you may find yourself.

I was born into a tactile world of vinyl records, corded telephones, paper maps, cash and film that had to be developed before you discovered whether the photograph existed. Technology was somewhere you went, before I watched it migrate onto the desk, onto the network, into the cloud, into the pocket, into culture, into business and eventually into almost every waking moment.

I have spent much of my working life inside that migration, first writing software and later building businesses as the internet, cloud and now AI changed what companies could make, how they reached markets and how they organised themselves. Each wave felt unprecedented because each was, but underneath them ran the same human impulse to overcome another constraint through more power, speed, choice, connection, information, productivity and, now, intelligence.

For most of history, more gave us a direction because scarcity provided the compass. Now the compass is moving.

We may find ourselves with more knowledge than we can absorb, more content than we can consume, more choices than we can evaluate and more machine intelligence than we know what to ask of it. We may find ourselves living inside the future and still wonder how we got here, but that is no longer the difficult question.

The difficult question is where we go when capability itself stops telling us which direction constitutes progress.

Perhaps the next definition of progress will depend less on relentless addition and more on judgement: knowing what deserves to exist, what should remain human, which friction gives life meaning and when efficiency improves an outcome rather than merely removing something that mattered.

For centuries, we built machines to help us move, manufacture, communicate, calculate, know and create. Now those machines are beginning to participate in the thinking itself, leaving us with the question no machine, however capable, can legitimately settle on our behalf:

What is all this capability for?

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