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When Anything Can Be Made, What Deserves to Exist?

AI is collapsing the cost of creation. The harder—and increasingly valuable—work is deciding what deserves our attention, effort and capital.

Manchester has never needed much help looking cinematic. Rain catches the brick, light arrives sideways through cloud, and there is always the sense that something interesting might be happening in a room nobody thought to look inside.

Years ago, while I was at Microsoft, I produced a documentary with Johnny Marr about creativity in the digital age. We wanted to understand what happened to the creative process when technology changed its tools, and Marr was an unusually revealing person through whom to explore the question. His career had crossed successive technological eras without becoming captive to any of them.

What stayed with me was not how much the technology had changed, but what it had failed to replace. Watching Marr work, creativity looked less like inspiration than a continuous sequence of judgements: whether an idea was interesting enough to pursue, whether a sound belonged, whether something needed adding or removing, whether an accident contained possibility, whether another person might take the work somewhere he could not.

Technology expanded what was possible, but it did not decide what was worth doing. That distinction mattered then. AI is making it decisive now.

Generative technology is collapsing the distance between intention and artefact. Music, images, films, software, campaigns and products can move from idea to plausible execution at extraordinary speed. Work that once required specialist capability, significant capital or days of human effort can increasingly be produced in minutes, and our instinctive response has been to ask how much more we can make.

That may be the least interesting question.

When almost anything can be made, making becomes less differentiating. The scarce capability moves towards deciding what should exist and taking responsibility for whether it creates value. Taste is part of that capability, but the more consequential word is **judgement**. Taste distinguishes the good from the merely competent; judgement determines what deserves scarce attention, people and capital.

AI is not making judgement obsolete. It is turning judgement into economics.

The instrument can now generate

Music offers an unusually clear view of what happens when technological constraints disappear. Recording moved from scarce physical infrastructure towards software, editing became cheap and reversible, and distribution escaped factories, warehouses and record

shops. A musician could eventually record, produce and distribute work using equipment that would once have required an institution behind them.

Marr never treated this as an assault on creativity. Long before generative AI, he argued that technology could produce interesting results when used by someone with taste. When we made *Creativity in the Digital Age*, he returned to the same idea from another direction: however sophisticated technology became, the ones and zeros still needed imagination, human feeling and spirit before they became something to which another person responded.

That observation has aged unusually well because the technology has crossed another boundary. The instrument can now propose the chord, render the image, write the paragraph, produce the code and offer another hundred alternatives before a human has finished considering the first.

The old question was what technology might allow us to create. The new one is what happens when creation itself stops being scarce.

We solved production. We did not solve desire.

In June 2026, fully AI-generated music exceeded half of the tracks uploaded to Deezer on its peak day, amounting to roughly 90,000 tracks in 24 hours. The number matters less as a statement about music than as evidence of a change in production economics: supply can now expand at a rate that would have been impossible when every new track required proportional human creative labour.

Attention cannot expand at the same rate, nor can desire, trust, curiosity or meaning. People do not acquire more hours because more entertainment can be generated. Customers do not develop more problems because more software can be written. Companies do not acquire more demand because marketing content becomes cheaper, and executives do not gain better judgement because a model can produce another thousand pages of analysis.

This is the paradox at the centre of generative AI. The technology makes answers abundant without making consequences any less finite. Every company still has limited capital, every product competes for customer attention and every initiative consumes organisational capacity. The marginal cost of producing another option may be collapsing, but the opportunity cost of choosing the wrong one is not.

That is why productivity cannot be the whole AI thesis. Reducing the cost of producing something does not, by itself, increase its value. A cheaper unwanted product remains unwanted. AI can generate the campaign without earning attention, build the feature without creating product-market fit and produce a hundred propositions without giving customers a reason to care about one of them.

The machine can make the song. It cannot tell us why the song deserves to exist.

Abundance moves the bottleneck

Technological revolutions are partly stories about constraints. Cheap computing reduced the capital required to build software businesses but did not make distribution free. Digital publishing removed the printing press as a barrier and exposed attention as the next

constraint. Social media removed much of the cost of broadcasting and created an industrial-scale competition to be noticed.

Generative AI goes further because it reduces the cost of producing many forms of intellectual and creative work simultaneously. This can shorten the distance between hypothesis and prototype and make it much cheaper to discover that an idea is wrong. Used well, AI can therefore improve capital efficiency not simply by lowering the cost of production, but by lowering the cost of learning.

The same capability can produce the opposite result. A vague proposition can become an immaculate website before anyone establishes willingness to pay. An undifferentiated product can become working software before anybody proves the problem matters. A broken organisational process can be automated so efficiently that nobody stops to ask why it exists.

AI makes good ideas cheaper to execute, but it makes bad ideas cheaper to execute too.

As execution costs fall, management has to replace accidental discipline with deliberate judgement. The advantage will not belong simply to organisations that become better at producing, but to those that become better at deciding.

Building faster is not learning faster

Much of the corporate conversation about AI still measures velocity through output: more code, more campaigns, more prototypes, more analysis and more features shipped with fewer people. Those measures can be useful, but a company producing ten times as many experiments without learning anything faster has increased activity rather than intelligence.

The deeper advantage of cheap creation is not that companies can commit faster. It is that they can learn more before committing. Prototype before building the system. Test the proposition before scaling the sales organisation. Put the price in front of customers before constructing economics around imaginary willingness to pay. Use the market to destroy weak assumptions while they are still inexpensive, then concentrate capital behind the few that survive.

AI weakens the old relationship between experimentation and commitment by making it possible to create evidence before making the larger bet. That should change capital allocation.

The economic prize is not simply more output per employee. It is fewer employees, months and dollars committed to things that should never have survived the experiment.

When everyone has the machine, advantage moves elsewhere

The more broadly available an underlying capability becomes, the harder it is to sustain differentiation merely by possessing it. If every serious competitor can generate competent copy, generated copy is unlikely to be the advantage. If everyone can produce software faster, speed of production eventually becomes part of the entry ticket. If every company can create endless imagery, imagery becomes abundant while distinctiveness becomes harder.

This does not make the technology economically unimportant. Electricity became ubiquitous without becoming irrelevant, just as cloud computing became broadly accessible while enabling extraordinary economic value. Infrastructure matters because it changes what can be built on top of it and therefore where differentiation can live.

When foundational capability becomes widely accessible, advantage has to be built around things competitors cannot obtain simply by opening the same tool: customer context, distribution, trust, workflow position, brand, proprietary learning, relationships and organisational capability. Above all, it depends on the judgement required to combine them coherently.

This is where taste becomes more than aesthetics. A company has taste when its choices appear to belong to the same idea: product, proposition, pricing, customer experience and operating model reinforce rather than contradict one another.

Customers experience that as coherence. Investors experience its economic consequences through willingness to pay, retention, distribution efficiency, operating leverage and differentiation.

Taste becomes economically interesting when it changes behaviour. Judgement becomes economically important when it changes where capital goes.

The human advantage is not being human

There is a sentimental version of the AI argument in which machines may become extraordinarily capable but humans retain creativity, emotion and soul. It is comforting, but insufficient. Humans also produce derivative work, tolerate mediocrity, defend sunk costs and remain attached to ideas long after evidence has turned against them. Human provenance does not make an output valuable.

The more useful question is what humans remain unusually valuable for, and watching Marr work suggested an answer long before AI made the question urgent. Imagination mattered, but it was only the beginning. He had developed the craft to realise an idea, the judgement to recognise whether it was becoming interesting, the discipline to continue when it was not, the confidence to remove what did not belong and the openness to allow another person to alter the result.

Those qualities matter not because they are human, but because they improve the consequence.

AI can participate in increasingly large parts of that process, and that is not something to mourn. The interesting question is not which territory humans can defend from the machine, but which decisions become more consequential because the machine has enlarged the territory of possibility.

The organisation needs an editor

Most companies begin their AI programmes with an understandable question: where can this technology reduce cost or increase productivity? Which tasks can be automated, which roles augmented, how much faster can software be produced and how many customer interactions can agents handle?

Those questions belong in the operating plan. They should not define the strategy.

If a product organisation can produce ten times as many features, the company does not need ten times as many features; it needs greater precision about which few change customer behaviour. If marketing can generate unlimited content, it needs a proposition worth noticing and distribution capable of reaching the people who might care. If executives can generate infinite analysis, another answer may be the last thing the organisation needs.

Abundance therefore shifts part of management from orchestration towards selection. The organisation needs editors: people capable of understanding the whole strongly enough to know what does not belong.

That judgement cannot remain concentrated in the CEO or founder. If AI increases execution capacity throughout the organisation, teams need the context and principles to make good decisions without escalating every choice upwards. Otherwise AI creates a peculiar new bureaucracy in which extraordinarily fast execution waits for permission from the handful of people capable of deciding what should actually be done.

The bottleneck has not disappeared. It has moved into judgement.

Seven disciplines for abundant creation

Make learning faster than production. As execution becomes cheaper, speed increasingly means discovering whether something deserves further investment. Measure how quickly consequential uncertainty disappears, not how many artefacts appear.

Move judgement before commitment. Use cheaper experimentation to confront reality earlier. Better evidence before scaling should mean less rework, stronger adoption and less capital trapped in weak ideas.

Separate possibility from permission. Something becoming technically possible and inexpensive is not an argument for doing it. Possibility should become commitment only when customer behaviour, strategic advantage or economics justify the decision.

Multiply experiments, not mediocrity. If generating ten propositions costs little more than one, create ten, expose them to evidence and kill nine. Cheap creation should lower the cost of being wrong, not increase the volume of wrong things reaching the market.

Preserve productive friction. Remove bureaucracy created by constraints that no longer exist, but preserve disagreement, editing and scrutiny where they improve decisions. Friction that delays work is waste; friction that exposes a false assumption can save the investment.

Build advantage outside the model. Assume competitors will gain access to comparable underlying intelligence. Build what can compound around it: proprietary context, customer relationships, distribution, trust, workflow position, learning and organisational capability.

Reward subtraction. As creation becomes cheaper, what management chooses not to pursue becomes increasingly revealing. Track what was stopped, simplified or killed because evidence changed the decision. Capital discipline begins with creative discipline.

The machine changed. The responsibility did not.

When we made *Creativity in the Digital Age*, we were looking at a world in which technology had transformed the instruments of creativity. Marr's point was never that the machine threatened the human, but that the machine remained insufficient without the imagination and judgement capable of turning technical possibility into something another person could feel.

Nearly a decade later, the machine is considerably less insufficient. It can manipulate the ones and zeros itself, generating rather than merely recording, editing or distributing. It can imitate styles, propose alternatives and produce competent work at a scale no human organisation could match.

That does not make the original observation obsolete. It reveals the larger idea inside it.

When the means of creation were scarce, scarcity made many decisions for us. Time, money, specialist capability and production capacity limited what could enter the world. As those filters weaken, more of the burden of choosing passes back to us.

For founders, that means resisting the temptation to mistake what can be built for what deserves to become a company. For CEOs, it means designing organisations that become more selective as their productive capacity increases. For investors, it means looking beyond AI adoption towards whether management is converting cheaper experimentation into better capital allocation and durable advantage.

The boardroom question is therefore no longer simply where AI can help a company make more with less, but what that company is becoming better at choosing now that almost anything can be made.

The deepest consequence of AI may not be that machines learn to create. It may be that, as the old constraints fall away, humans lose the excuse of scarcity.

Possibility is becoming abundant. Judgement carries the consequence.

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