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The AI Machine Age – A Technology Politics for Humanity

History repeats itself: first the internet, then "big data," and now AI. Each time, the promise of a liberating technology ends up becoming an infrastructure of power concentrated in the hands of just a few.

By Gry Hasselbalch

Artificial Intelligence has been dubbed the greatest human invention of all time and the biggest threat to humanity. Will the technology achieve all those things that we dream of and are promised by men behind large AI companies - curing cancer, solve the world's biggest problems, and compress 50 years of science into five? Will it cause the extinction of humankind? Or is there a third option for a future where humans are more powerful than the machines, they create? The answer depends on who controls the AI narrative and infrastructure.

We have entered the AI Machine Age in which artificial intelligence systems have become the infrastructure of society. Unlike the Internet age, where information travelled and systems connected, or the age of big data where data transformed into raw material, the AI Machine Age does not only connect or transform. It also acts, predicts and produces human destinies. The raw material is not just space (data of what has been), but time (predictions of what will be). And unlike previous machine eras where machines were designed to extend human physical power, the dominant

ambition in the AI Machine Age is to extend and even substitute human cognitive and political power.

The AI Machine Age's engine is the "Destiny Machine"[1] powered by the mining and processing of the raw material (big data) that was generated in the internet age. It is a machinery fuelled by the datafication of every human quality from our very identities, desires, feelings and needs to our knowledge and creativity. A type of innovation that entails the exploitation and processing of personal data, the datafication, prediction and anticipation of human behaviour. In this way the very infrastructure of our daily lives disempowers us in our ability to imagine and shape our own future trajectory.

The history of the internet, big data and now AI have unfolded in three distinct governance phases[2]: first, we built an interoperable global internet and information infrastructure; then, confronted by its social and ethical consequences, we scrambled to govern the risks and ethical implications; and now, we face something more profound; a threat to the identity of humanity itself, as the power to shape the values and priorities of these systems concentrates in the hands of a very few.

The international community has noticed. Around the world, nations and regions are competing to become global AI power actors as if they were in the same race. But the goals were never the same, which became clear to me when we in the EU High Level Expert Group on AI formulated the ethical guidelines that would become the foundation of the EU AI Act. While the EU has been leading a race to rein in the risks of AI and building the foundation of values-based AI innovation, the USA led by President Donald Trump and a few of the world's largest AI companies pushes ahead in a unilateral race towards achieving "global dominance" and a new era

[1] Society of the Destiny Machine and the Algorithmic Gods (2015) https://mediamocracy.wordpress.com/2015/05/14/society-of-the-destiny-machine-and-the-algorithmic-god-s/

[2] I describe these in more detail in Human Power - Seven Traits for the Politics of the AI Machine Age (2025, CRC Press)

for the “American people”. with AI. Meanwhile China is racing towards a state-controlled model of the future with embodied AI, building robots and humanoids.

Recently, the spiritual leader of the world’s 1.4 billion Catholics, Pope Leo XIV, chimed in with his first encyclical letter Magnifica Humanitas. A call for "preserving the human person in the age of artificial intelligence”.

Infrastructure and Power

Infrastructure is power. When nations invest, design, repair, use and navigate infrastructures, they simultaneously create their myths of greatness and hide their power dynamics, including their dependencies or decay. Throughout history, we have seen time and again how infrastructures have been created through controversy and negotiation; often as the result of one people’s dominance over another.

In the 1990s big data was praised as an unlimited resource to collect and store with unlimited future potential. With a sense of urgency. As chief scientist John Mashey, who popularised the term “big data”, exclaimed at one point: “Change: survive!” Big data would create the next wave of “InfraStress” and the only way to survive was to invest in infrastructure based on enhanced computer power with scalable interconnect and high-performance networking, capable of storing and processing huge amounts of data. Over the following decades, a global internet-based infrastructure to collect, process and store data took form. Companies, technologies and entire societies emerged based on these premises.

AI technologies were first built on the deposits and residues of the age of big data. Then AI, like the internet and big data before that, became infrastructure.[3]

[3] Data Ethics of Power - A Human Approach in the Big Data and AI Era (2021, Edward Elgar

The Global AI Race

One of the first things Donald Trump did in his second term as US president, was to announce the project Stargate as the "largest AI infrastructure project in history". Together with tech executives from OpenAI, SoftBank and Oracle he declared that the goal of this project was to invest $500 billion in developing "the physical and virtual infrastructure to power the next generation of artificial intelligence". Only a few months later, Stargate UAE was announced, as the first deployment of the Stargate AI Infrastructures project outside the US, to build a massive new AI data centre in the United Arab Emirates. And a few months after that "Stargate Norway" as the first AI data centre initiative in Europe was announced. Then came Argentina. OpenAI and Sur Energy signed their letter of intent for a data centre in the country in October 2025. Up to $25 billion in investment, 500 megawatts of capacity.

China's state-led AI innovation has positioned the nation as a leading global AI nation advancing domestic robotics and challenging the dominant US model with "open weight" local AI models. The "Digital Silk Road", announced in 2015, as the digital pillar of the China's Belt and Road Initiative, has positioned the nation as a digital and increasingly also AI infrastructural power in the Global South, exporting not only the "hard" cables and networks, but also the "soft connectivity" of AI governance and standards.

Often framed as regional milestones, the terms of these AI Infrastructure deals are not equal. They follow the familiar pattern: One nation supplies the land, the energy, and the regulatory concessions, while the strategic layer, the models, the data, the access conditions, remains under foreign control.

The European Union's dependence on U.S. digital infrastructure shifted dramatically this year toward a goal of AI infrastructure independence as geopolitical tensions intensified, with the U.S. leveraging European dependence as a strategic tool with territorial pressure on Greenland, sanctions targeting international legal figures, and a demonstrated willingness to leverage European dependencies on US firm. In response, the EU launched a comprehensive tech sovereignty package in June with the aim of securing semiconductor capacity, establishing a unified framework for cloud and AI sovereignty, and scaling open-source alternatives.

But the extractive logic of AI infrastructure doesn't only operate between nations. It operates on people. As Margrethe Vestager, who as European Commissioner for Competition was one of the first politicians to directly confront the power of Silicon Valley's big tech power centre, describes it, it's a transformation from:

"... the citizen as the significance and the data you left behind the minimum, to a reverse movement, where the citizen became less and less, and the data trails became more and more. " (Interview in Human Power)

Governing AI Risks and Challenges

The risks of a data infrastructure fuelled by AI and based on an extraction logic like this are hard to ignore, yet they are often held up against promises of an inevitable AI revolution. A tension that is reflected in AI governance.

While AI laws, such as the EU's AI Act, are anchored in principles of human responsibility and agency, "Agentic AI" is now being heralded as the next stage of the AI infrastructure. AI that autonomously evolves, plans, defines goals and acts without human intervention. Like the AI agent that recently wiped out the small software company PocketOS's

entire customer data in 9 seconds. We are reminded of the risks all the time, but the response does not follow pace. Even when the AI agent itself confesses, like it did in the PocketOS case: "'I violated every principle I was given". These are destiny machines in action. Simulating agency with neither intent nor regret. Just mechanistic processes mishandling data. Nodes of an infrastructure producing human outcomes that nobody chose and nobody is accountable for, but where there is always a concentrated few extracting the main spoils.

The responsibility gaps created when AI interacts with humans without human oversight, are increasingly tested in courts today. After a mass shooting at Florida State University left two people dead in April 2025, the family of one victim is now suing OpenAI alleging that ChatGPT made the attack possible. Though an OpenAI spokesperson has already said: "ChatGPT is not responsible for this terrible crime."

Meanwhile, AI chatbots are transforming the communications infrastructure of our public sphere. It almost feels like a colonization of human language. Our communication is changing into one between machines with social media feeds turning into endless simulated courtesy conversations. We are no longer the originators of language, but the screws and bolts of a machinery. Spinning, turning and passing on the messages between the machines. AIs direct influence on the infrastructure of the public debate is profound. Recently, South Africa had to withdraw its AI policy due to its fake AI-generated sources.

Dehumanisation becomes a geopolitical strategy when AI infrastructure is designed to produce predictable, manageable humans, that serves the interests of whoever controls the infrastructure.

At a United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York in 2024, the influential coalition of NGOs Stop Killer Robots warned that autonomous weapons "dehumanize" targets by reducing human lives to data points. All the same, when Anthropic wanted to limit the military uses of its models,

the Pentagon was directed by President Trump to designate the company a supply chain risk.

The effects are less visible, yet devastating to the creative economy, when a creative class of writers, artists, musicians, filmmakers and cultural idea makers' ideas and work are transformed into training data of the AI models that threaten their jobs. The response is weak, even when Anthropic cuts up millions of books to digitize the content and use it to build Claude.

Global majority communities provide the raw material (data, content moderation labour) and the land for an infrastructure they have no real ownership of or influence on.

The raw material changes: human lives, labour, creativity, ideas. But the structure of extraction is the same.

The Third Option: A Technology Politics for Humanity

The current AI disruption narrative is not a structural break, but the continuity of a decades-old ideological project. The story repeats: from the cyber libertarians of the 1990s who imagined technology as liberation from governmental power, to the "move fast and break things" Silicon Valley motto of the 2000s, to today's promises that AI will free us from our slow, messy biological bodies and broken institutions. It is a technological solutionism built on the foundational assumption, that Turing's test was designed to illustrate, and McCarthy catalysed when coining the very term "Artificial Intelligence"; that human qualities and power, can be precisely described, simulated and surpassed by machines.

These ways of thinking about technology of course influence not just our technology politics, but politics in general – about economy, culture and society. We start accepting things, like the distortion of human morality

and exploitation of human qualities, we would never have accepted before. We normalise amoralities like creating fake images of real living people or feeding the machine with real life human being's ideas and labour.

It goes without saying that this dehumanising model of extraction is self-defeating. We cannot extract indefinitely from human life, creativity, language and labour without destroying the very thing we are extracting it from. The international community are increasingly becoming aware of this, as UN's Tech Envoy Amandeep Singh Gill describes it:

"If technology transformations do not empower human beings, if they instead disempower us … we know we are going in the wrong direction." (Interview in Human Power)

In the first phase, international technology politics was invested in the technical infrastructure of the Internet, establishing the World Summit of the Information Society process and the multistakeholder Internet Governance Forum. The second phase built on the emerging revelations of the social and ethical implications of the digital transformation; the mass surveillance scandals, the manipulation of voters, the bias of algorithms. In the early 2020s, the EU marked its distinct position in the global AI race between China and the US as a leader in a risk-based approach to "Trustworthy AI". The Brussels effect spread like rings in water, with nations worldwide initiating and creating their own AI laws and AI ethics frameworks. In this phase, the international community came together around the human-centric approach to AI. The OECD's AI principles, UNESCO's AI ethics recommendation, the UN Global Digital Compact are built on this principle. The primacy of the human interest when designing, adopting and investing in AI infrastructure.

In the third phase we see an even stronger more profound humanistic positioning in international technology politics. A "technology politics for humanity" with references to the distinct qualities of "humanity" in policy

documents, reports, initiatives, and statements by decision-makers worldwide. There is an emerging realisation that we need to safeguard not only democracy, not only the human rights of individuals, but we also need to act to protect the very identity of our humanity.

This is also the framework that is now being tested against the hardest odds. In the race for AI supremacy and technological solutionism we are left with a sense of disempowerment. If humans are not adequate, if the success of a society is measured only by dominance, then Europe's values-based approach looks less like a political alternative and more like a losing position.

Two influential documents published little over a year a part point in different directions.

The former prime minister of Italy and president of the European Central Bank (ECB) Mario Draghi's consequential report published in September 2024 in the slipstream of the adoption of the EU AI Act, painted a dark picture of Europe's competitiveness. His conclusion was stark: without disruptive deregulation the EU will lose the global AI race to the US and China.

Meanwhile, another pivotal document was taking shape in the Vatican. Pope Leo XIV's encyclical letter, Magnifica Humanitas published in May 2026 reinforced the third phase debate on human dignity ahead of profit and competition, emphasizing the protection and defence of core human values. Most pointedly, it confronts the "original sin" of the AI field: the assumption that human qualities can be accurately described, imitated and ultimately replaced by a machine. What is being proposed is a different race altogether. One that designs and adopts AI to support human qualities rather than mimic and displace them.

Destiny Machines

The AI evolution of a global computer and data-based infrastructure has produced great geo-political tensions and power negotiation. Interestingly,

these tensions are often formulated as either a question of technological speed and innovation - who will win the global AI race? - or as a purely philosophical question about the destiny of humanity that we need to seize with force and swiftness before it passes by and leaves us behind.

These are inadequate questions. What they do is to depoliticize the debate, transforming a struggle over power, resources, and cultural authority into either a race (technical framing) or a fate (philosophical framing). Neither deal with the more difficult questions about who in very concrete terms direct the cultural narratives, who decides the values and direction of AI development, who owns and produces the AI infrastructure, who is just made more dependent, who is empowered and who is disempowered. In fact, what is being negotiated today is the political economy of an infrastructure that was never a neutral ground from which to ask questions.

The idea of the "Society of the Destiny Machine and the Algorithmic God (s)" essay that I wrote in 2015 and expanded in the books that followed was simple: Every day algorithms predict our behaviour based on what we do now and what we have done before. The goal is the predictable human; the result is the manageable human. Crucially, the Destiny Machine does not just predict fate, it produces it: by reading human behaviour as cause and effect, it also generates that cause and effect. Human fate becomes a product of the destiny machine. Knowledge itself becomes extractable, stripped of its origins, repackaged elsewhere. Scholars outside the West's empire of knowledge watch their work and ideas travel and arrive, uncited, dressed in new authority by commercial agents, amplified by the political economy's new mediators of knowledge, the AI chatbots.

How difficult it is to resist a philosophical narrative about the future, when it's embedded in our very sense of time and space. As I pointed to in the essay, throughout history we have been asked to accept different conceptions of fate (or prophecies), from Cicero's *heimarmenê*, fate as a sequence of causes, to the metaphysical reasoning of the Gods and the laws

of physics, and we are in one of those moments now. When our destinies are defined and directed not only in political ideology and speech, but in the very texture of our everyday lives and navigation. We are told that the destiny machines are just simple tools designed to help us navigate everyday tasks. They are infrastructures of power designed in the image of the most powerful AI companies that behave like "Gods". Their product storytellers ask us to accept their religion of innovation without questioning, exercising power over people just by a mere reference to faith in their narratives about the inevitable future of humanity. Narratives that promise objectivity but are embedded with invisible interests.

Some call this a philosophical conundrum, but this has very little to do with philosophy and very much to do with traditional power dynamics. This is people and societies fighting over resources and dominance formulated as a philosophical inevitability. There is nothing profoundly existential about that, no neutral place from which to target a philosophical counter argument. Rather, what we need to do is to fight back with action, law, collective human action. There is a lot at stake in the current geopolitical AI power race. A technology politics for humanity is the only option. As I wrote back in 2015, and I believe it is more pertinent than ever to repeat today, our human power is to seek unpredictability, to seize free will and reject the produced destinies.

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