We're Not Being Taken Over, We're Handing It Over

Abstract

Everyone is worried about AI taking over, whether it's our jobs, our schools or the movie version with robots and chips in our brains. What I think is actually happening is a lot quieter than that, and we are the ones doing it. Every day we give AI a little more of our emails, our searches, our questions and our thinking, and slowly even the company we used to get from real people. This article looks at what research says about what that does to the way we learn and think, why AI answers can sound right even when they are wrong, what a chatbot can never give back to us, and how all of it runs on real buildings that use real electricity and water. It ends with a simple question about what we should keep for ourselves.

1. Everyone Says AI Will Take Over, but We Keep Using It Anyway

We all say it. AI is going to take over, it's going to take our jobs, etc etc . Everyone has their own version of the story, and most of us are at least a little bit scared of it.

And then we go and use AI for everything anyway. We use it to reply to emails, to ask about things, and for very basic stuff we could have figured out ourselves in two minutes. When we search something on Google, a lot of the time we don't even open a single link. We just read the AI overview at the top and call it a day.

I do this too, every single day, so I'm not writing this from some high horse. I just find it strange that the thing we are most scared of is also the thing we can't stop opening.

2. Nobody Is Forcing Us to Do Any of This

Here's the part that bothers me the most. Nobody is making us do any of this. There was no new law and no robot standing at the door. Every time we hand something over, it feels small and reasonable, because it's just one email or just one quick question.

But those small things add up fast. In the UK, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) surveys university students about AI every year. In 2024, 66% of them said they used it. In 2025 that went up to 92%, and in the 2026 survey it was 95%, with 94% saying they had used it for work that gets graded. One student in that survey said, "I'm not using my brain at all." That is the UK and not Pakistan, but honestly, walk into any college here and tell me it looks very different.

Searching is the same story. Pew Research tracked the browsing of 900 American adults in March 2025 and found that when Google showed an AI summary, people clicked on a normal search result in only 8% of visits, compared to 15% when there was no summary. They clicked on a link inside the summary itself in just 1% of visits.

Therefore, if this is a takeover, it is a pretty strange one, because we are the ones signing up for it.

3. What Happens to a Brain That Stops Doing the Work

Psychologists have known about something called the generation effect for a long time. Back in 1978, Slamecka and Graf showed that people remember things better when they come up with the answer themselves instead of just reading it. In 2020, McCurdy and colleagues looked at 310 experiments

together and found the same pattern again and again. When we work something out on our own it actually sticks, and when it is handed to us it mostly doesn't.

Now think about what happens when AI does that work for us. In 2025, a team at MIT led by Nataliya Kosmyna had 54 people write essays. Some used ChatGPT, some used a search engine, and some used only their own brains. The ChatGPT group showed the weakest brain connectivity, and many of them could barely remember what they had just written. The researchers called this "cognitive debt." To be quite clear, it was a small study, it is still a preprint, and Kosmyna herself has said it does not prove AI causes "brain rot." It does fit with what other researchers are finding, though.

Microsoft and Carnegie Mellon asked 319 knowledge workers about how they use AI at work, and the more confident people were in the AI, the less critical thinking they said they did. Another study by Michael Gerlich in 2025, with 666 people, found that heavier AI use was linked to lower critical thinking scores, and younger people aged 17 to 25 leaned on AI more and scored lower than the older groups. That's my age group, by the way. These studies show a link and they don't prove that one thing causes the other, but the direction is pretty hard to ignore.

4. AI Sounds Sure of Itself Even When It Is Wrong

The other problem is that AI always sounds confident. It never says "umm, I'm not sure" the way a friend would. It just gives you a clean, well-no written answer, and because it sounds right, we believe it.

Researchers at Purdue tested this with 517 programming questions from Stack Overflow, a website where programmers answer each other's questions. They found that 52% of ChatGPT's answers had wrong information in them. Then they asked a small group of 12 programmers to compare those answers with human ones, and the programmers still preferred ChatGPT's answers 35% of the time and missed its mistakes 39% of the time, mostly because the answers sounded so complete and well written. That study used the free GPT-3.5 version of ChatGPT, and the models have improved since then, but the part about us trusting a confident tone hasn't really changed.

It isn't only coding either. In 2025, the BBC and the European Broadcasting Union had journalists from 22 public media organisations in 18 countries check more than 2,700 answers that ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot and Perplexity gave about the news. 45% of them had at least one significant issue, and about 20% had major accuracy problems, like made-up details or information that was out of date.

Everyone has a voice now, and that includes machines. Having a voice is a very different thing from actually knowing what you're talking about, and once we stop checking, we slowly lose the ability to tell the two apart. And the worst part of this is that we are the ones who blindly trust AI, even though most AI chatbots clearly state that it can make mistakes check information but we still don't do it.

5. A Chatbot Can Talk to You but It Can't Hug You

Some people now go to AI for company as well. In that same HEPI survey, 15% of students said they use AI for friendship or to deal with loneliness. I do understand why. It is always awake, it never gets bored of you, and it never judges you.

There is a lot it simply cannot give you, though. In a study by Sheldon Cohen at Carnegie Mellon, 404 healthy adults were tracked and then exposed to a cold virus. People who had more support and more hugs were better protected from the effects of stress, and the ones who did get sick had milder symptoms. Laughing together does something too. Robin Dunbar's research in 2012 found that laughing with other people while watching comedy raised their pain threshold, which is linked to the body releasing endorphins. A chatbot can make you smile, sure, but it can't sit in the room and laugh with you.

The research on chatbots themselves isn't very comforting either. OpenAI and the MIT Media Lab ran a four-week study with 981 people, and those who used the chatbot more every day tended to feel lonelier, depend on it more, and spend less time with real people. That is a correlation, and it could simply be that lonely people use chatbots more. Either way, it doesn't look like the chatbot is fixing the problem.

6. The Cloud Is Actually a Building

We say our files and chats are "in the cloud," which makes it sound like they are floating somewhere up in the sky. They aren't. The cloud is a lot of very big buildings full of computers, and those computers need electricity to run and water to stay cool.

According to the International Energy Agency, data centres used around 415 terawatt hours of electricity in 2024, which is about 1.5% of all the electricity used in the world. By 2030 that is expected to more than double to around 945 terawatt hours, slightly more than the whole of Japan uses today, and AI is the main reason for that growth.

Water is the other half of it. Google is one of the few companies that actually publishes these numbers, and it reported that just one of its data centres, in Council Bluffs, Iowa, consumed about 1 billion gallons of water in 2024. To be fair to Google, it also says a typical text prompt to its Gemini app uses about 0.26 millilitres of water, which is around five drops, although some researchers say that number leaves out the water used by the power plants that make the electricity. Either way, one prompt really is tiny. The problem is how many of them we send. ChatGPT alone was getting more than 2.5 billion prompts a day by July 2025, and every "can you rewrite this email for me" is part of the demand that makes companies build more of these buildings.

7. So What Do We Keep for Ourselves?

I'm not telling anyone to stop using AI. I use it a lot, including while working on this article, and I'm not going to pretend I don't. It is a useful tool and it's not going anywhere.

But since we are the ones handing everything over, we are also the ones who get to decide where to stop. Nobody else is going to take it back for us. For me, the line is somewhere around thinking. If something needs my own brain, like writing what I actually believe or remembering something I care about, I want to at least try it myself before I ask anything else to do it.

So here is one small thing you could start with today. The next time you are about to ask AI something simple, give yourself two minutes to figure it out on your own first. If you still need it after that, go ahead and use it. Either way, you will have actually used your brain for those two minutes.

After that, ask yourself honestly which parts of your thinking you are okay giving away, and which ones you want to keep.

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