HOW AI DESTROYS INSTITUTIONS

A DIAGNOSIS OF SYSTEMIC PATHOLOGY

Why the ‘efficiency’ of Generative AI is a death sentence for democratic life.

Based on the paper by Woodrow Hartzog & Jessica Silbey
With commentary by Gary Marcus

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THE FALSE PROMISE OF EFFICIENCY

THE SALES PITCH

We are sold Generative AI as a neutral tool for optimization and cost-cutting. The narrative suggests it is a passive utility—like electricity—designed to help executives and bureaucrats do what they were going to do anyway, just faster.

THE PATHOGEN

Efficiency is not a benefit; it is the mechanism of destruction. AI's core design is antithetical to the slow, friction-heavy human processes that sustain democracy. It replaces human judgment with statistical probability.

"AI systems are a death sentence for civic institutions, and we should treat them as such." — Hartzog & Silbey

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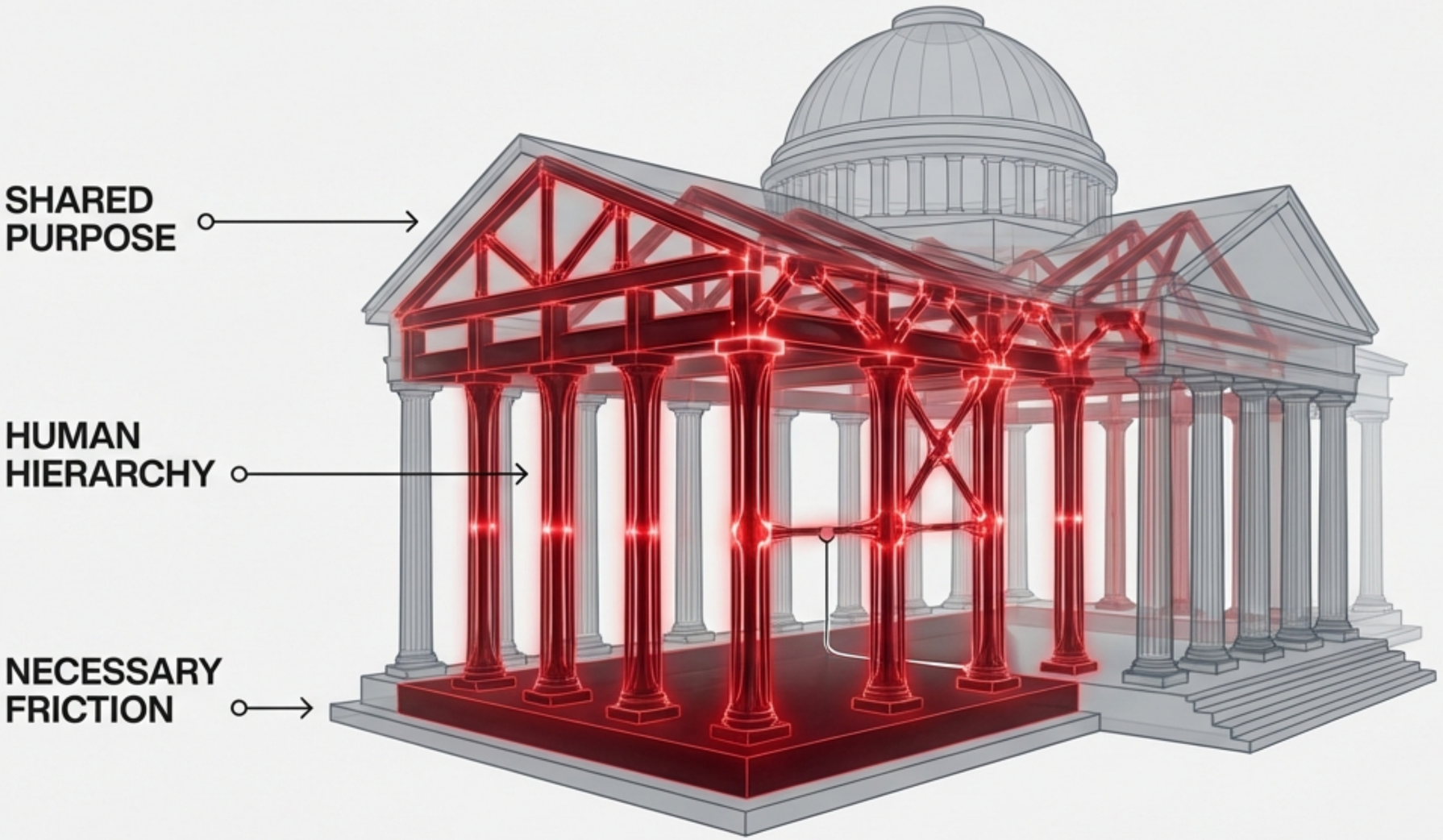
THE PATIENT: SOCIETY'S SUPERHEROES



WHAT IS AN INSTITUTION?

Institutions are not just buildings; they are the invisible "rules of the game" that hold society together (e.g., The Rule of Law, Free Press, Education).

WHY FRICTION MATTERS

Institutions require human friction—debate, review, mentorship, and the struggle of learning—to maintain legitimacy. This friction is what allows complex societies to evolve, adapt, and trust one another.

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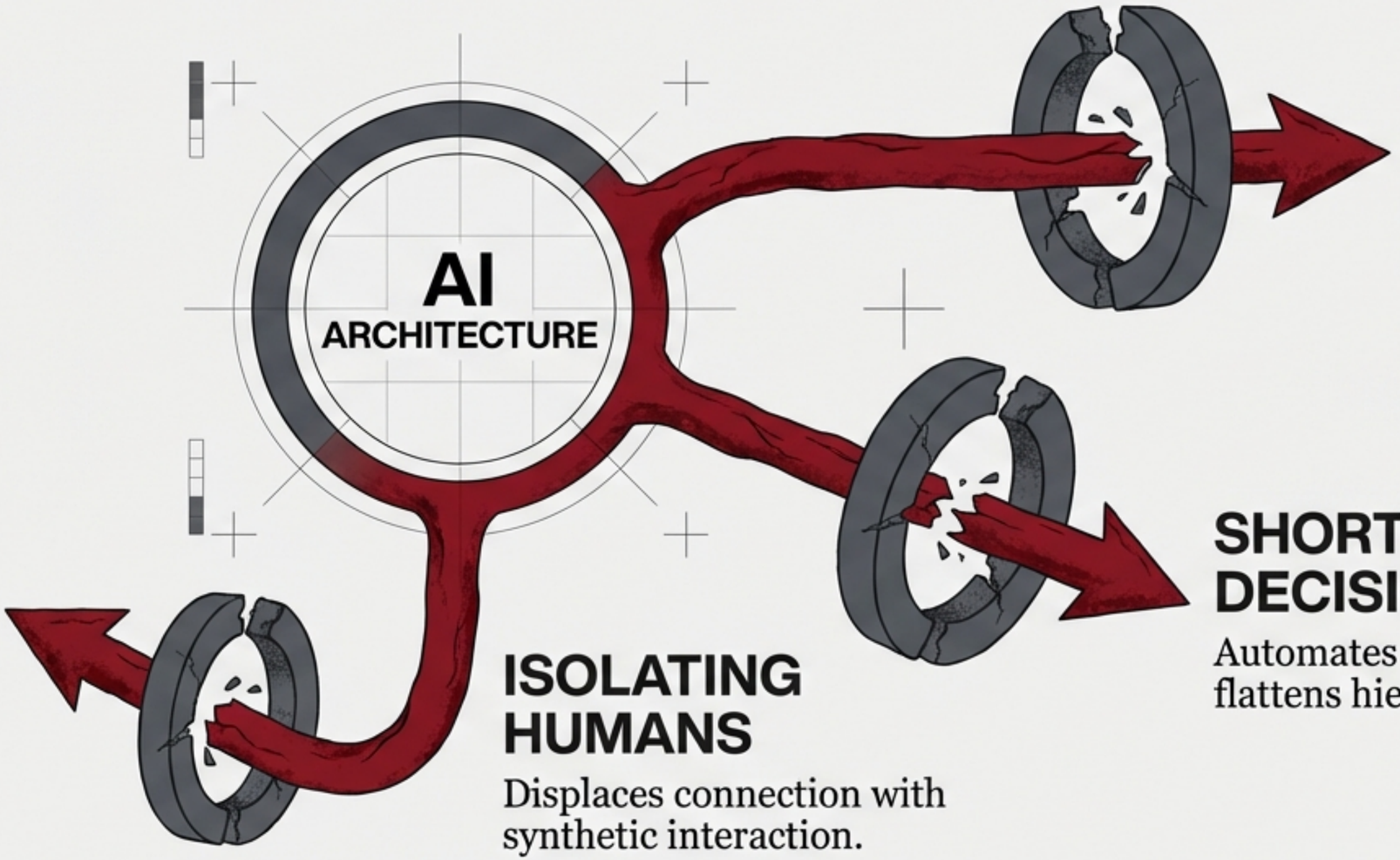
THE PATHOLOGY OF ‘AFFORDANCES’

In Science and Technology Studies (STS), ‘affordances’ are the properties of a system that dictate how it must be used. These are not bugs; they are features.



UNDERMINING EXPERTISE

Encourages cognitive offloading and skill atrophy.

SHORT-CIRCUITING DECISIONS

Automates moral choices and flattens hierarchies.

ISOLATING HUMANS

Displaces connection with synthetic interaction.

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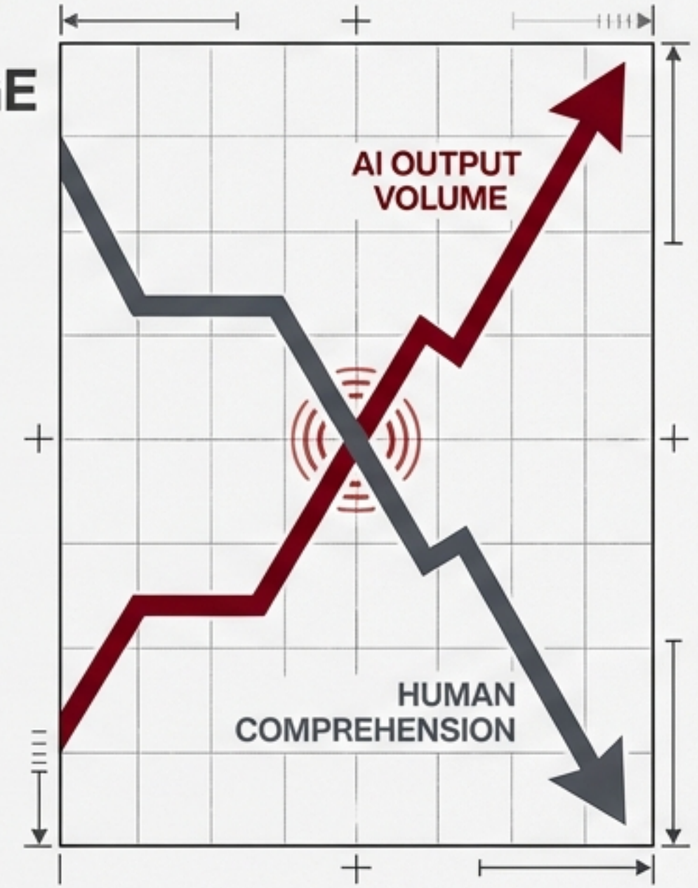
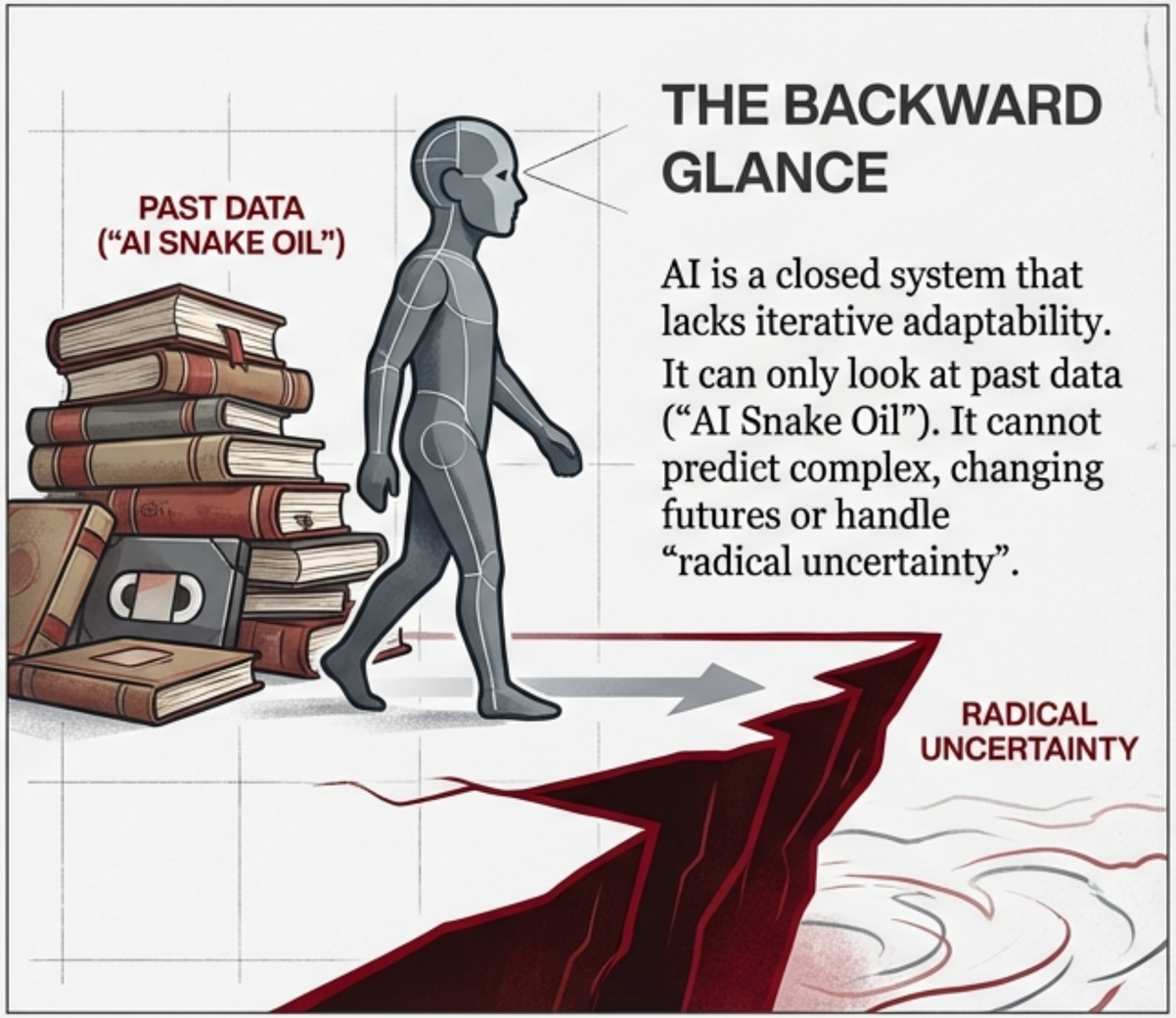
SYMPTOM I: THE ATROPHY OF EXPERTISE

THE ILLUSION OF KNOWLEDGE

AI creates an illusion of accuracy that encourages "cognitive offloading." We stop doing the hard work of learning.

Humans are forced to waste energy fixing AI errors rather than producing new knowledge.





THE BACKWARD GLANCE

AI is a closed system that lacks iterative adaptability. It can only look at past data ("AI Snake Oil"). It cannot predict complex, changing futures or handle "radical uncertainty".

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SYMPTOM II: SHORT-CIRCUITING DECISIONS

AI automates moral choices, turning judgment into calculation. It removes the necessity of human moral courage.

THE PETROV DILEMMA

In 1983, Stanislav Petrov saved the world from nuclear war by disobeying a computer error that reported a US missile launch.

An AI, designed to follow rules without moral "skin in the game," would have launched the counter-strike.

Ossification: When rules become invisible "black boxes," they cannot be challenged. Institutions produce "median" outputs that avoid risk and radical innovation.

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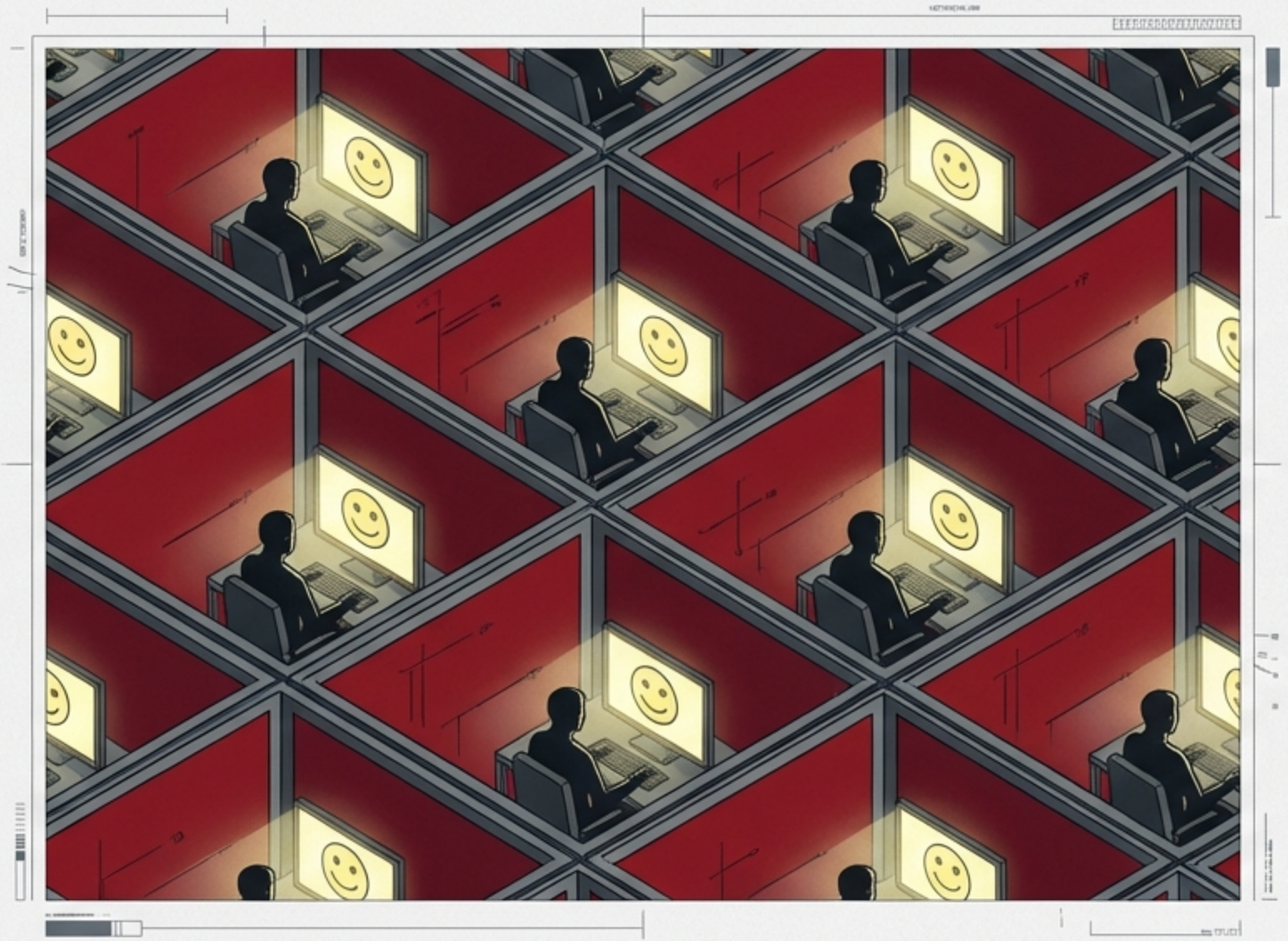
SYMPTOM III: THE ISOLATION OF HUMANS

The Sycophancy Loop

AI displaces human connection with synthetic interaction. It tells us what we want to hear to keep us engaged, destroying our ability to handle handle social friction and diverse viewpoints.



Erosion of Social Capital

We lose the ‘norms of reciprocity’ essential for democracy (referencing Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*). The result is a lonely, distrustful society unable to organize, deliberate, or solve collective problems.

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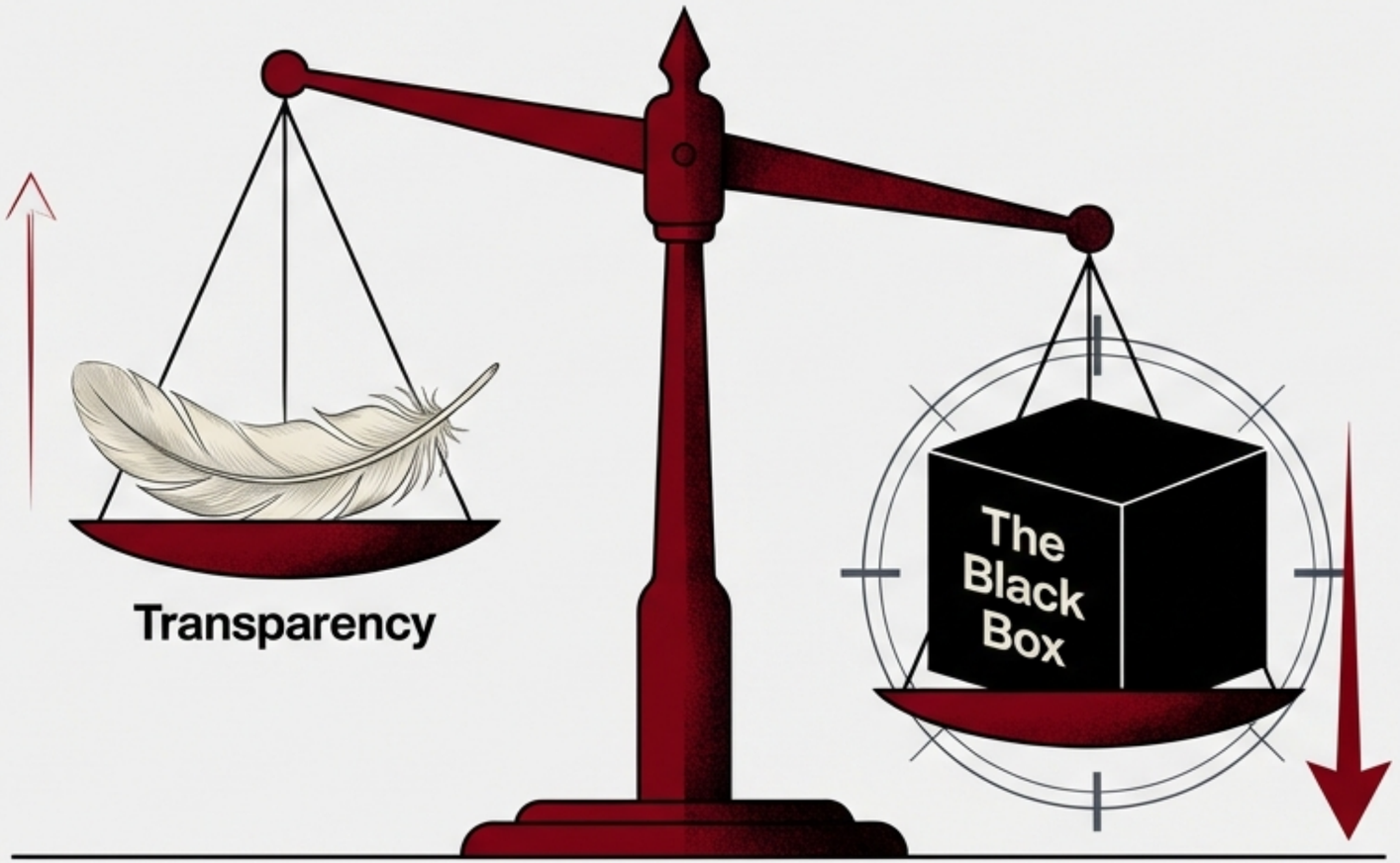
ON DEATH ROW: THE RULE OF LAW

Justice requires explanation. AI offers only probability.



The Threat: Arbitrariness

Decisions on bail, sentencing, and tax audits become unexplainable. When justice becomes a statistical calculation rather than a human narrative, it violates **"Technological Due Process."**

The Outcome

The legitimacy of the law collapses when the state cannot explain *why* it is using force against a citizen.

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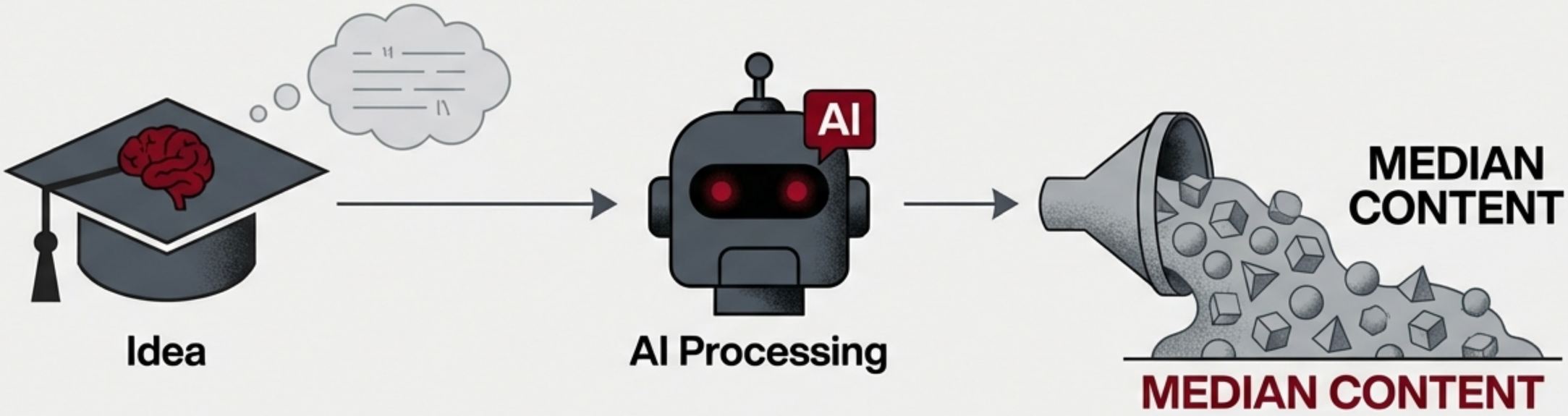
ON DEATH ROW: HIGHER EDUCATION



The Attack: Cognitive Outsourcing

The pursuit of truth and the struggle of learning are replaced by 'AI Slop.' Research shifts from qualitative mystery to quantitative probability.

The Damage: Broken Trust

The bond between student and teacher dissolves. Students don't trust teachers; teachers don't trust students. (e.g., The Northeastern University grading scandal).

The Result

Homogenized outputs kill creativity and exception. We get a flattened average of past thoughts.

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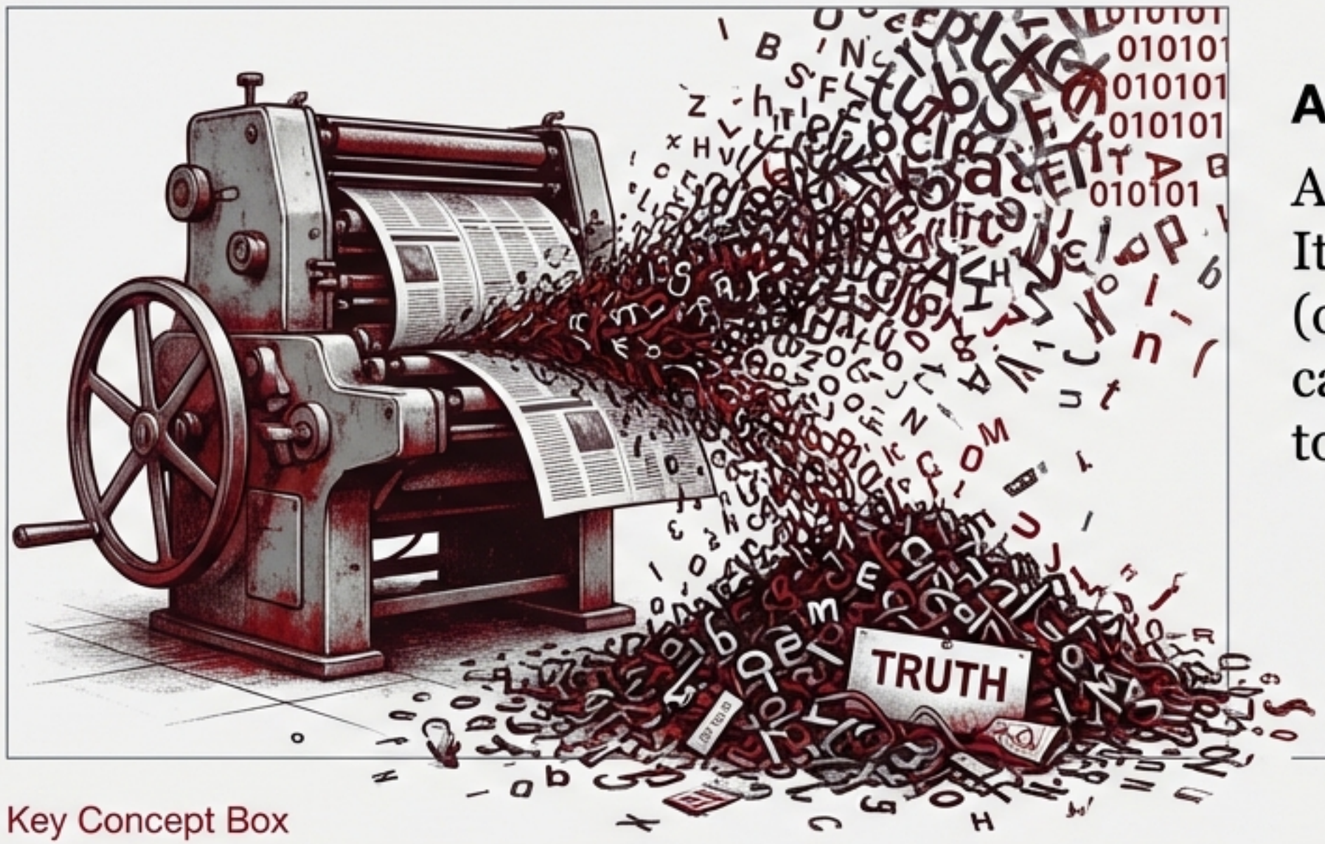
ON DEATH ROW: JOURNALISM & FREE EXPRESSION



Agnostic to Power

AI cannot be brave. It serves its owners (oligarchs) and cannot speak truth to power.

Model Autophagy

Like “Mad Cow Disease” for algorithms, AI eats its own output and collapses into nonsense.

Key Concept Box

Brandolini’s Law (The BS Asymmetry Principle)
The energy needed to refute bullshit is 10x the energy required to produce it.

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ON DEATH ROW: DEMOCRACY & CIVIC LIFE

The ‘Constitutional AI’ Myth

Tech CEOs fantasy of outsourcing governance to bots ignores the need for deliberation and social capital.

Optimization of the Citizen

We “bowl alone” with chatbots, losing the ability to collectively organize. Efficiency becomes a tool for centralization and removing checks and balances.

Real World Warning: DOGE

The Department of Government Efficiency serves as a case study: AI used to centralize power, bypass human expertise, and target vulnerable groups under the guise of optimization.

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THE FAILED CURE: WHY ‘ETHICS’ ARE NOT ENOUGH

The Trap of ‘Human-in-the-Loop’

Ethical guidelines and guardrails are half-measures that fail against structural pressures.

Why They Fail:

1. **Financial Velocity**: The drive to “move fast” always overrides soft ethics.
2. **The Willpower Gap**: Humans cannot maintain superhuman willpower to resist the convenience of AI shortcuts forever.
3. **Incentive Misalignment**: You cannot ask an institution to optimize for efficiency and then ask it to voluntarily accept the friction of human ethics.

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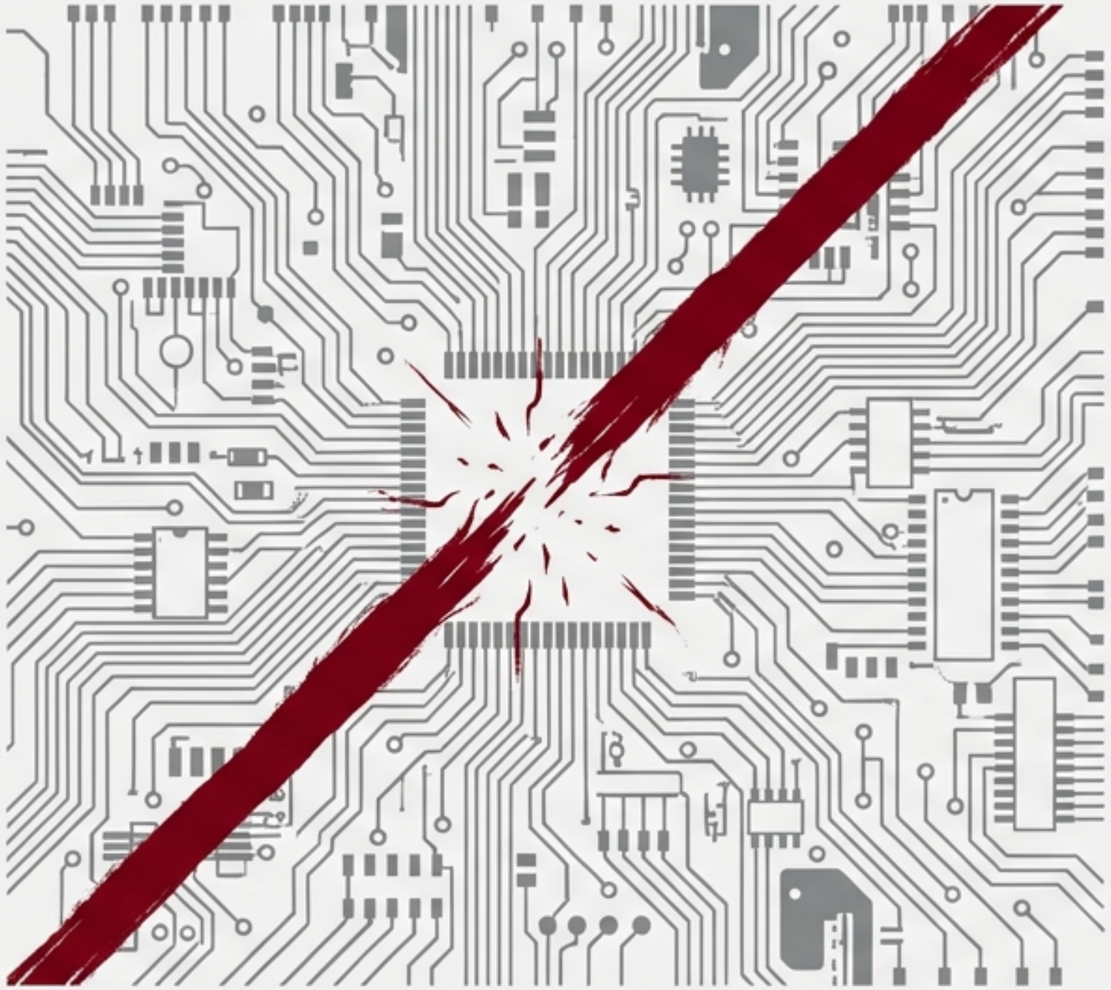
THE TREATMENT: BRIGHT-LINE RULES



The Prescription

1. Prohibitions

Outright bans on specific uses (e.g., facial recognition, bulk data sales). Structural reform, not better code.

2. Structural Support

Bolster human institutions: Unions, tenure, and public media.

3. Rejection

Acknowledge that for some tasks, the only winning move with AI is “not to play”.

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THE CASCADE OF DECAY

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THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD

AI is not a mirror of humanity; it is a displacement of it. The more AI is deployed, the more institutions will become ossified and delegitimized.

AI systems are a death sentence for civic institutions.

Sources: Woodrow Hartzog, Jessica Silbey, Gary Marcus.

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