

Book Review

Micah Voraritskul

Human is the New Vinyl: Why Human Creativity Still Wins in the AI Revolution—Reviewed by
GEOFFREY HART **Index Terms**—Artificial intelligence (AI), paradigm shift, revolution, technology.

UNLESS you have been living in a cave—and even then, you probably have internet access—you have probably noticed that the already uncomfortably fast rate of technological change is accelerating. There is some debate over whether we are on the brink of the “technological singularity” [1]. If not, it is certainly growing closer by the minute, uncomfortably fast.

Humanity has always created tools, usually without any concern over the consequences until the consequences can no longer be ignored. Yet, for the most part, we survive each new tool’s arrival and are generally better off for its existence. The Industrial Revolution gave us a world that revolves around inexpensive goods and services; it is no longer necessary to work for a month to create a new set of clothing. The scientific revolution has given us moon rockets and antibiotics. Yet, Ned Ludd (mythologized as a heroic worker who smashed weaving frames to protect human jobs) provides a warning, because change is always disruptive and sometimes harms as many people as it helps, at least until we learn how to adapt. This problem is increasingly obvious to those of us who work with words in the age of ChatGPT, and whose careers are vanishing as we are replaced by software that increasingly approaches the quality of skilled writers—and soon, possibly even our best writers.

Yet, sometimes everything old is new again. For example, vinyl records are increasingly popular for audio recordings even though digital audio’s clearly superior from a purely technical perspective. Micah Voraritskul’s *Human Is The New Vinyl: Why Human Creativity Still Wins in the AI Revolution* explores why. Voraritskul, who is passionate about music and other human art forms, suggests that vinyl’s revival stems from its tangibility: the ability to touch something makes it somehow more real and creates a sense of permanence that digital lacks. In short, it represents *authenticity*. Best-selling author John Scalzi agrees:

... human-generated work has a competitive advantage, because people see it as more authentic and real (which it is, to the extent that ‘authentic’ and ‘real’ mean “a product of an actual human brain”), and more likely to have the ability to surprise and engage the people who encounter it [2].

Human Is The New Vinyl is not an academic text supported by an extensive literature review; rather, it is a heartfelt, moving meditation on what it means to be human in an age of artificial intelligence (AI). It is easy to read, but thought-provoking. I particularly liked how Voraritskul’s approach supported my belief that to truly understand where we are right now, we need to know how we got here. In each chapter, Voraritskul provides a capsule history of a technology, such as writing, that clearly establishes how we got here.

So, what sets humans apart from AI? Creation requires mixing and matching sources and juxtaposing opposing viewpoints to generate thesis, antithesis, and synthesis; it is not clear AI can do this or (based on its current trajectory) that it ever will. It does not understand the information it is working with and thus cannot understand and

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resolve contradictions; instead, it “hallucinates.” It is not able to determine what is worth saying and what is not because it relies on things written by humans to tell it how to feign thought. There is no *gestalt* or *satori* moment when it all comes together in a synthesis. Instead, AI tends to condense and simplify rather than embracing and dealing with reality’s full complexity. That, indeed, is currently the easiest way to detect AI creations: as Voraritskul notes, AI has not lived through the aspects of race, culture, and class that each of us has survived, and thus deals poorly with such issues. “Good writing takes empathy, vulnerability, and connection” (p. 123), which are not easily faked.

Though Voraritskul is not wrong, I suspect a deeper cause of our affection for older technologies: we appreciate “retro” technologies, such as vinyl, because of their imperfection; for we, too, are imperfect creations, and that shared imperfection creates a bond. With “retro” technology, such as vinyl, there is a sense of something that has passed through time as we have. I remember how difficult it was to recover my old word processor files after only 10 years had passed, whereas my grandparents’ vinyl (and shellac!) records survived more than a century with negligible damage and were just as eager to play as the first time. Does that endurance connect us to the past and provide reassurance to armor us against our own impermanence?

Voraritskul wonders whether the human–AI divide must define a zero-sum game, or whether it can become a win–win game in which AI does the grunt work and leaves the truly creative part to us. The possibility for those who could not previously create to join humanity’s millennia-long conversation is surely a good thing, since more voices and more diversity enrich the conversation. (Unfortunately, this also means quieter voices are drowned out amidst the noise.) If AI frees us to create things we could not otherwise find a way to express, is not the creative desire the most important thing? Those who hone their skills for decades are unlikely to agree. That is particularly true if AI continues to be implemented through capitalist mechanisms that emphasize zero-sum games over “everybody wins” cooperation.

The book is handicapped by the lack of an index and it is full of multiple blank pages between chapters, which waste space and push my

tree-conservation button. But these are quibbles. A more serious problem is that in an effort to be reassuring and optimistic, Voraritskul insufficiently considers billionaires and others who act in bad faith to create a world more to their taste and not at all to ours. This makes his emphasis in concluding chapters on learning to trust each other again seem overly optimistic. Fortunately, bad actors are a minority, and most of us prefer to trust each other and strive to create a world where we can live together. His belief that AI will have future limits seems similarly optimistic. For example, “Teachers offer what AI can’t: real context, genuine care, and a feel for the room” (p. 212). But nothing says AI cannot achieve this skill; it already fools many people who talk to AI bots and believe they are having a real relationship with a real person. If AI is not real, does that matter if it can give people what they need? If AI teaches students how to cheat rather than how to think, getting good grades on essays may be a Pyrrhic victory.

Years ago, I proposed establishing a way to prove that text was generated by a real human, and that this could serve as a kind of *appellation d’origine contrôlée* [3], the French standard that establishes proof of provenance, most familiarly for wine. But I never produced a way to implement this approach. Voraritskul succeeded, through his VerifiedHuman project [4], which builds on the concept of Fair Trade agriculture to establish authenticity. In this way, he hopes to “re-center human values in the creative process” (p. 265). The challenge will be how to establish the trust required for such systems to work. Not everyone is trustworthy, and if enough participants cheat, the system cannot continue to work. Authors of a certain vintage, like me, can prove that at some point we were living creators: we tend to have a long track record of pre-AI publications. Younger creators will find it challenging to establish such a proof and will instead rely on trust.

Many questions raised about AI have not yet been answered. As a result, where we have arrived is deeply stressful, and Voraritskul echoes the words of Elizabeth II before him (“Keep calm and carry on”). As he notes, “The human connection still matters. And it always will” (p. 215), and that connection may be what saves us if we can learn to trust each other and work together: “The future still holds space for both triumphant and tragic endings. It’s up to us to decide which one we allow to become reality” (p. 239).

REFERENCES

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