

Digital Humanism an introduction

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Vienna

July 6 2026

VIENNA MANIFESTO ON DIGITAL HUMANISM

Vienna, May 2019

“The system is failing” - stated by the founder of the Web, Tim Berners-Lee – emphasizes that while digitalization opens unprecedented opportunities, it also raises serious concerns: the monopolization of the Web, the rise of extremist opinions and behavior orchestrated by social media, the formation of filter bubbles and echo chambers as islands of disjoint truths, the loss of privacy, and the spread of digital surveillance.

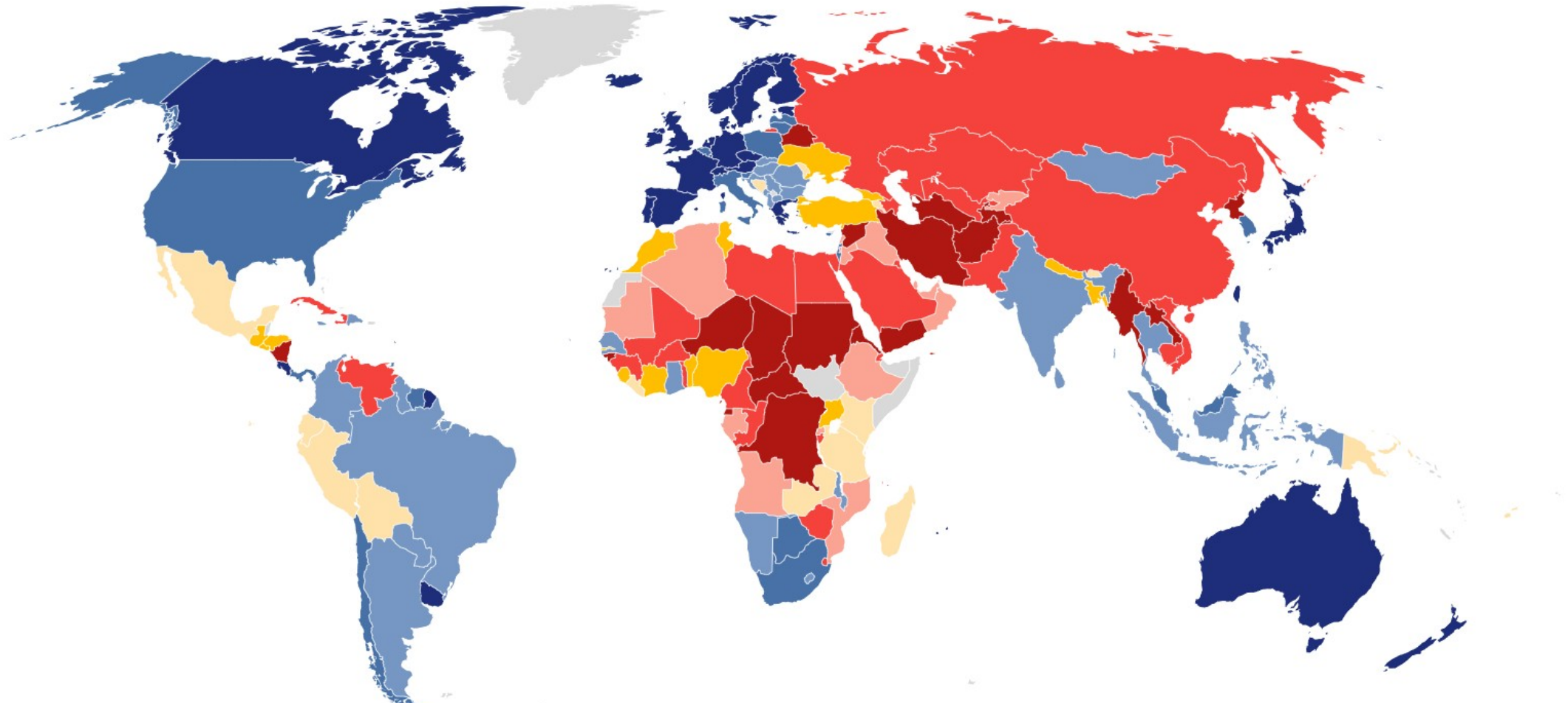
Digital technologies are disrupting societies and questioning our understanding of what it means to be human.

The stakes are high and the challenge of building a just and democratic society with humans at the center of technological progress needs to be addressed with determination as well as scientific ingenuity.

Democracy is failing! dem)

SOURCE: EIU 2026 (check also V-

Authoritarian regime Hybrid regime Flawed democracy Full democracy



Representative Democracy: Three pillars

- **John Locke** *17th century*
- **Elections** of governments by the people (Kick the rascals out!)
- **C.L.Montesqieu** *18th century*
- **Separation of powers** (executive, legislative, judiciary)
- **John Stuart Mill** *19th century*
- **Human Rights** : Individual liberty and rights. Protect against tyranny of the majority

Democracy: Failures

Elections : Disinformation, weaponized social media and AI . Voter mistrust and apathy

Public sphere flooded with toxic sludge. Polarization.

Catechism/manipulation by “AI –companions”

Separation of powers

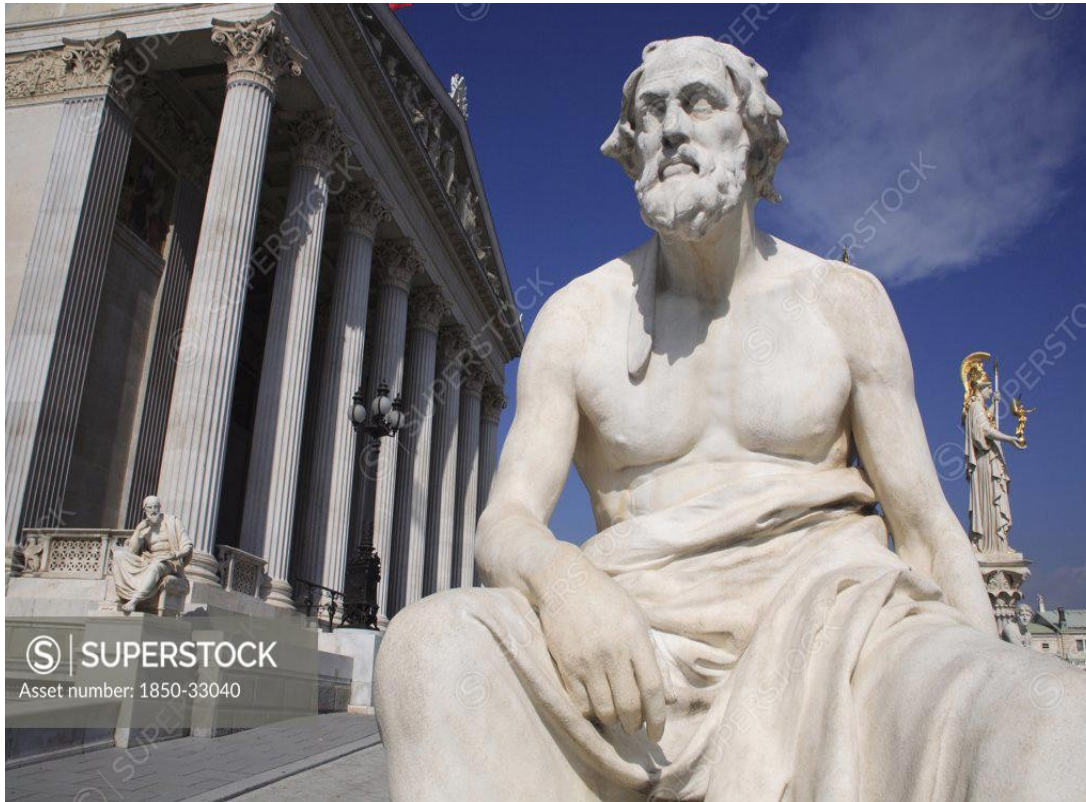
Executive Aggrandizement ! Increasing % of young favour a ...”strong leader”

Human Rights

- Rights of minority are trampled on
- Surveillance (icl. Biometric)
- Economic Inequalities (increasing)
- Concentration of economic and political power: Big Tech companies
- Loss of Trust in institutions (also internationally) and each other

Geopolitics and AI: Might makes right

Digital Divide, Data colonialism
Threat to democracy!



**The strong always
do what they can,
and the weak suffer
what they must.**

- **Rights are only
pertinent between
equals in power.**



Are all these gloomy forecasts to be passively accepted?

- Digital Technology is NOT a force of nature
 - AI (like the Web) is a human artifact
 - Beneficial applications to be designed and promoted
 - Potential harmful applications NOT to be treated like volcano eruptions and earthquakes but to be avoided at the design stage.
 - Unavoidably there will be f**k-ups! They should be treated as such
 - Critical Thinking and “optimistic skepticism”
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Proactive “Backcasting” vs Passive Forecasting

- Passive forecasting: Weather, Earthquakes, Hurricanes.....
 - Backcasting:
 - Construct YOUR vision of the future (choices to be made!)
 - YOUR Enlightenment
 - Identify techs/policies needed to achieve it
 - Identify obstacles and strategy/tactics to overcome them
 - Create a roadmap with milestones (and then revise dynamically)
 - Unite with like –minded and act on behalf of civil society
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YOUR vision ?

- A free and open Public Sphere (as envisaged in early www days)
- Web Oligarchs broken up! Plurality of R&D (role of universities!)
- Re-directed digital R&D to serve humanity (Vienna Manifesto)
- AI that helps/augments rather than replaces (Acemoglou)
- Guidelines to protect universal human rights (Regulation!)
- Re-set of liberal democracy, social justice and cohesion

Throw in your own ...extras!



Inspiration
from past
“Enlightenmen
ts”



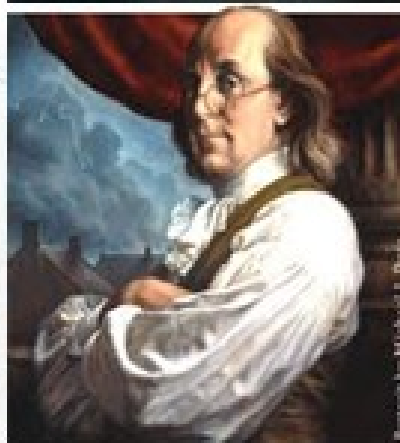
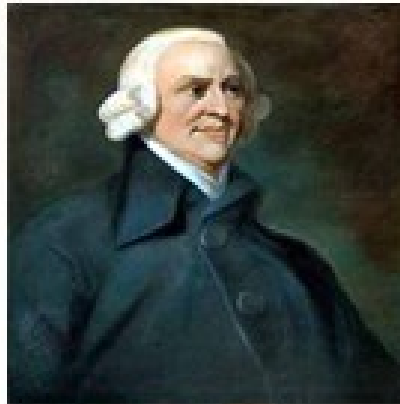
Digital Humanism:
A guide towards a
new
enlightenment

The 18th century enlightenment

Voltaire
Diderot



Adam Smith
Ben Franklin



Industrial Revolution

Humanism

Free Discussion: Anything,
anywhere

Light of Reason

Science AND Classics

Religious Tolerance

Challenge to Authority

Human Rights

Education: Sapere Aude

Dare to know

Diderot's Encyclopedia

French Salons

Lunars

The "Penny Universities"

Voltaire: The purpose of technology should be to serve society



"The measure of success for AI applications should be the value they create for human lives and society"

VIENNA MANIFESTO ON DIGITAL HUMANISM

- It is a call for reflection and **action**, also a research program
- Some core principles:

Democracy

- Digital technologies should be designed to promote democracy and inclusion
- Fairness, responsibility and transparency of software programs and algorithms

Regulation

- Action / intervention against Big tech monopolies
- Decisions affecting human rights must be made by humans

The role of Research, Science, and Academia

- The connection of different scientific disciplines is essential: Interdisciplinarity
- Universities (create new knowledge, enhance critical thinking) have a particular responsibility

Education

- Academic teaching needs to combine humanities, social sciences and engineering
- Education on Informatics and its societal impact must start as early as possible
- AI in education (currently a mess!)

Regulation :The three myths

- **1. Regulation stifles innovation**

Counterexamples (Automobiles, Pharmaceuticals and ... China)

- **2. Existing Regulation Suffices**

It does not but should be carefully examined before new ones

- **3. “Nascent” technologies should not be regulated**

The Collingridge Dilemma and its resolution (ex ante and ex post)

Automobiles and regulation

- 1910's': Break lights, turn signals
- 1920's : Speed limits and driving licences
- 1930's : Safety glass windshields
- 1940's : Hydraulic brakes
- 1950's : Padded dashboards
- 1960's : Collapsible steering wheel
- 1970's : Seat belts and catalytic converters
- **The automobile industry lobbied against all of these!**

Combined Attacks on Digital Regulation (US Gov +Big Tech)

From several angles and with different instruments

- **Ideological** : Ultra-libertarian

- (Harm principle rejected)
- General deregulation agenda

- **Corporate self-interest /Profit**

Hypocrisy: Zuckerberg/Musk decrying “censorship”

False dilemmas : “Regulation stifles innovation”

- **Geopolitical domination (The new empires)**

- Don’t regulate or China will surpass us!
- China has tight and enforceable regulation !

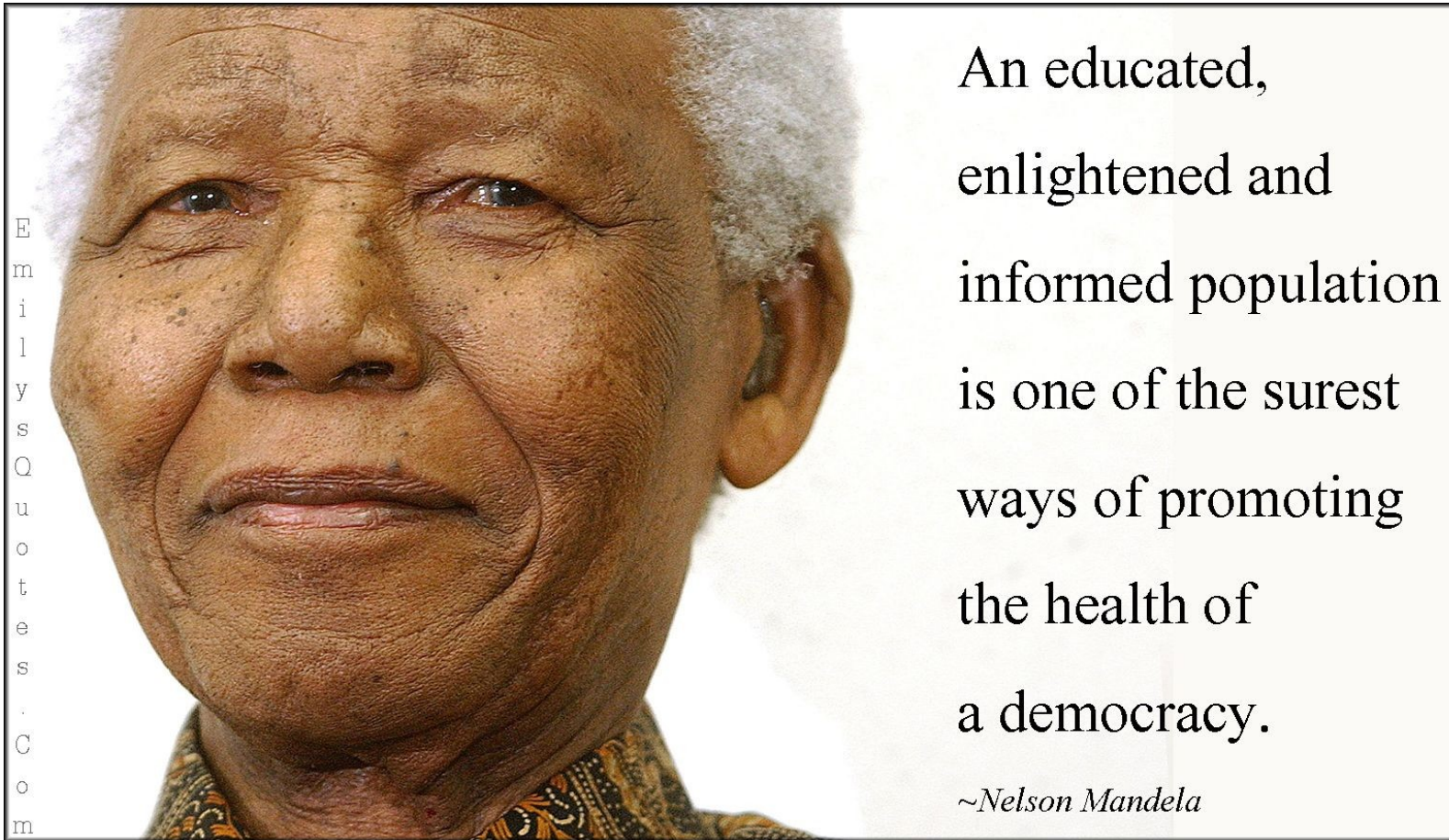


The Dighum open letter/petition and beyond;

A civil society engagement case-study

- Open letter : A civil society pushback against the deregulation lobbying.
- Submitted to the European Parliament's Petitions Committee.
- Hearing took place on July 16 2025 under the urgency procedure.
- EP committee decided unanimously in favour
- EC responded positively in 2026. (Prospects for DMA,DSA,AI Act good!)
- **LESSONS:**
- **Fight back. The “wait and see” time is over. Get involved! Get engaged!**
- **Try to learn to explain the need for all this better to young people**

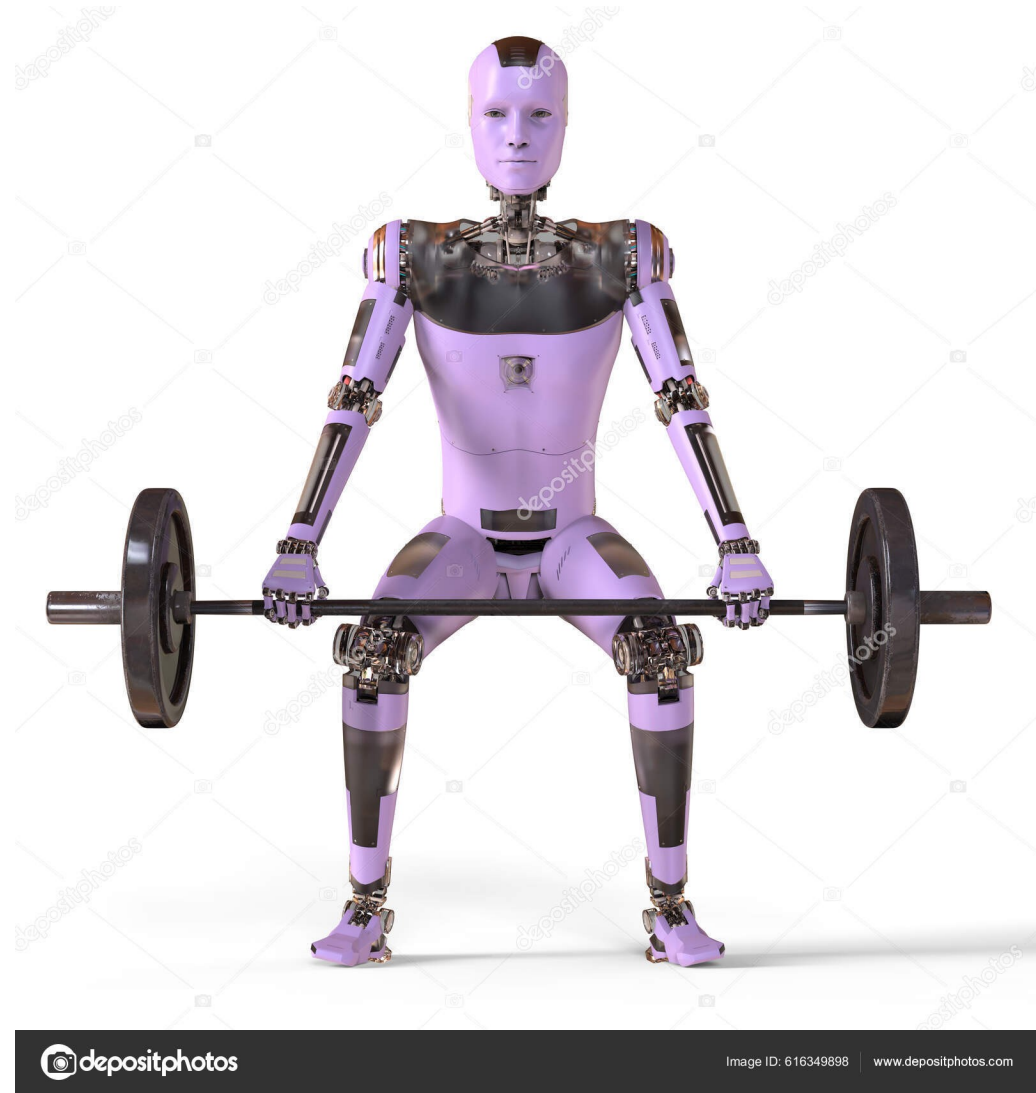
In today's classrooms sit tomorrow's societies



AI in Education and critical thinking

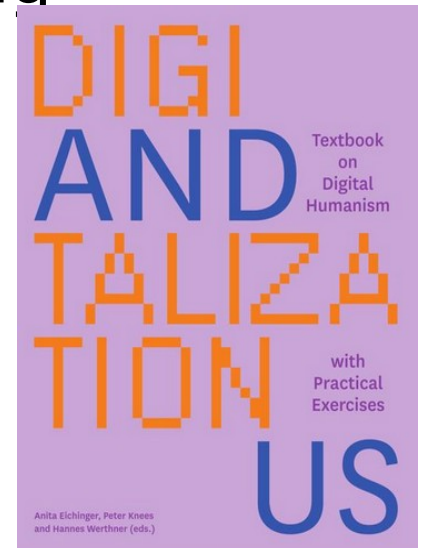
- Asking students to read, reflect upon, write about, and discuss ideas helped train them to think critically
- GenAI can simulate all of these steps: it can summarize readings, pull out key concepts, draft text, and even “discuss” ideas. But that would be like going to the gym and asking a robot to lift weights for you.
- Yes, of course, to AI for the classroom but not...mindlessly.
- The end of homework?
- Deeper problem: How to educate so that the young enjoy thinking independently and critically in an environment that keeps offering to do the thinking for them!

Weak body, weak mind?
De-skilling ?
Dependence
Subservience?
OR.....



An Education Revolution?

- The time has come for an education revolution as we still have a system motivated by the 18th century industrial revolution.
- How to motivate independent critical thinking from early stages for “digital natives”?
- Different approaches in different countries.
- Create a platform for adaption and adoption of promising practices
- Curate feedback and develop success metrics
- The Dighum education initiative
- It is still early days for AI !

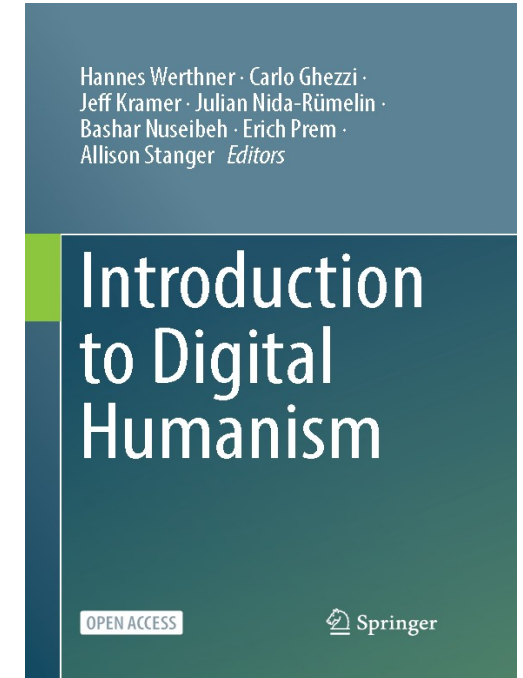
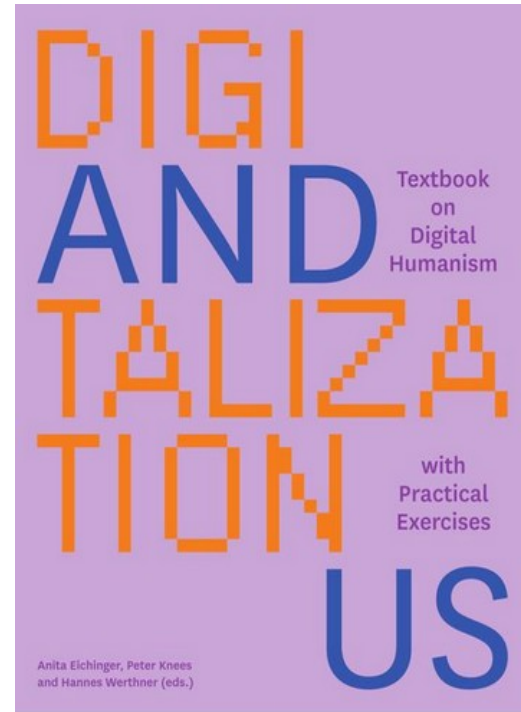
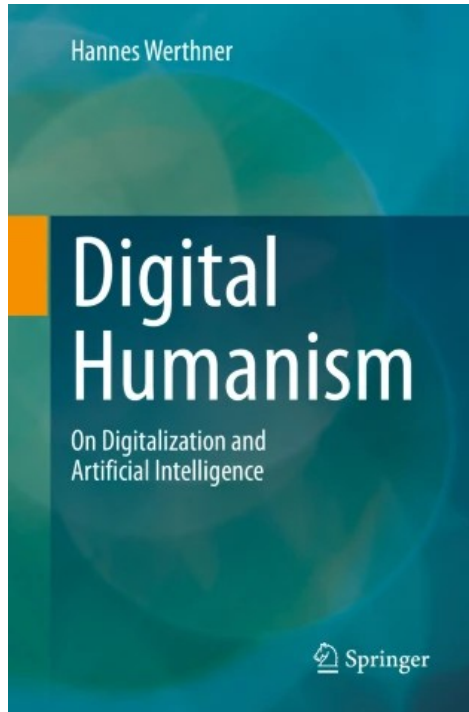


It is still early days

- **The Revenge of the Philosophy Majors**
- A.I. labs are hiring contrarian, chin-stroking, finger-steepling sages. Who's underemployed now?
- NY Times July 5 2026

Enlightenment :Voltaire and ...Ubuntu

- Voltaire argued that our actions should be judged by their usefulness to society
- Ubuntu describes a set of closely related African-origin value systems that emphasize the interconnectedness of individuals with their surrounding societal and physical worlds.
- "Ubuntu" is sometimes translated as "**I am because we are**".
- Should the future be shaped by the interests of a few tech executives and the politicians they influence or by the values and will of the people?
- **Make your choices and defend them!**
- **Fight for a humanistic democratic digital future**
- **Digital Humanism can help show the way forward**



dighum.org
Thank you