

Conceptual Reflection

The Future of Knowledge in the AI Era

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Debates on what knowledge is and how people know what they know, have been ongoing for centuries, where philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle already had opposing views. Philosophical and epistemological debates have provided the foundations of knowledge and the different types of knowledge. In general, knowledge is differentiated between tacit and explicit knowledge, where explicit knowledge exists in a codified form, while tacit knowledge is a possession of a knower and is accumulated through practice, learning and experience, and therefore, it is difficult to articulate (Polanyi, 1966; Nonaka, 1994; Simeonova, 2018). Also, knowledge is highly context specific (Simeonova, 2018). Knowledge and lived experiences are also relational, highly social and collective (Spender, 1996; Brown & Duguid, 2000). From that perspective, networks, social capital, communities of practice, are at the core of knowledge, learning and experience (Wenger et al., 2000; Wenger et al., 2002; Simeonova, 2018).

A question I keep returning to is: **What has changed and is changing in the way people learn and know what they know in the era of Artificial Intelligence (AI)?** And what might the future of knowledge look going forward? Would AI radically redefine what knowledge is and also the role of humans in knowledge processes? Or would the role of humans increase in prominence to ensure creativity and knowledge in humanity?

In 2001, Prusak noted that tacit knowledge and undigitized knowledge are more valuable in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) era. In a book chapter I wrote in 2022 (Simeonova, 2022), I particularly emphasized the role of tacit knowledge. The chapter outlined that there is the danger of AI falling off the knowledge cliff. In 2022, the “falling off the knowledge cliff” described that knowledge in AI is narrow and predetermined and at that point inaccurate for complex tasks because of the lack of tacit knowledge, intuition, creativity and experience. However, as AI capabilities exponentially develop, particularly the development of generative AI, the point now extends to knowledge “falling off the knowledge cliff” leading to a discontinuity in the development of human knowing: as reliance on AI increases, individuals may progressively lose opportunities to develop tacit, experience-based knowledge. Rather than gradually accumulating expertise through practice, reflection, and social interaction, knowledge formation could rely primarily on AI generated outputs, which over time, may lead to a structural weakening of human capability, where knowing is no longer enacted.

In that earlier work, I also discussed the ingrained nature of tacit knowledge as a human property, as well as the increasing and shifting power dynamics between knowledge, AI, and humans, and that the world is yet to observe the emancipatory capacities of AI for the enhancement of the lives of humans (Simeonova, 2022).

Therefore, it is important to intrinsically differentiate knowledge as a human property in an era where AI surpasses many human cognitive abilities: AI can limit the power of individuals, and reduce strategic decision-making to selecting AI-generated options, and replacing individuals’ experience and tacit knowledge, based on the premise that calculated rationality and data-driven decision-making leads to superior outcomes.

I have also discussed in greater detail the intersection of power, knowledge and digitalization/AI and the different effects of these technologies (Simeonova et al., 2020; Simeonova & Galliers, 2023; Simeonova & Ravishankar, 2023). The overall conclusion is that

the emancipatory use of AI, and emancipatory outcomes of the use of AI, are limited. There is a risk that as AI improves and its use increases, the less emancipatory the effects on humanity and society are. Areas where these effects are quite prominent are power dynamics and redistribution where technology and AI are now agents possessing power over knowledge processes, decisions, communications (Simeonova & Galliers, 2023; Simeonova & Ravishankar, 2023; Simeonova et al., 2024). In addition, the issue of knowledge as *“encoded in AI is also demonstrated in the challenges with the development of autonomous cars ... where context and interpretation of a situation are currently ignored”*, and the collective and social aspects of that context are (as yet) not within the AI scope, and *“(therefore), how AI is used needs considerable thought and consideration as in its current state, it does not have enough knowledge capabilities, and its current use hampers knowledge, learning, decision-making, innovation, and society”* (Simeonova, 2022).

I outline that the following aspects deem knowledge as intrinsically human property: creativity, curiosity, culture, social nature, experience, intuition, tacit knowledge, and emotions.

It is evident that generative AI is exponentially developing and that systems are trained to respond in an emotive and empathic way; on basis of capabilities that include the detection of human emotions and the generation of aligned responses (Rhue, 2023). However, this leads to a paradox in that people are replaced with algorithms, AI, robots, which then need to learn to behave like humans and respond to humans in an empathic way. The necessary question is: Whose emotions are these? The answer is: These are not AI emotions, and it is questionable whether AI can achieve emotional intelligence (Wan & Parkkinen, 2025).

Building on the article from 2022, and to understand more about the AI perception of tacit knowledge and how AI integrates tacit knowledge, I prompted Copilot (a generative AI platform developed by Microsoft AI, a division of Microsoft Corporation) to write its opinion on AI and tacit knowledge, and this is what it expressed:

AI struggles with the unspoken and intuitive. Tacit knowledge often involves:

- Intuition
- Contextual judgment
- Cultural nuance

These cannot be fully encoded in data, which is why tacit knowledge remains a fundamental limit of AI.

AI will augment—but not replace—expertise.

The most powerful systems will combine:

- Human tacit knowledge
- AI's pattern recognition
- Shared interfaces for learning and decision making

Source: Copilot output on artificial intelligence and tacit knowledge (Copilot, January 26, 2026).

Tacit knowledge, therefore, is not simply knowledge that is difficult to articulate, but knowledge that is constituted through practice (Cook & Brown, 1999; Orlikowski, 2002; Simeonova, 2018). It emerges from lived experience, situated interaction, and social participation, which is constituted in the contexts in which it is developed (Cook & Brown, 1999; Orlikowski, 2002; Simeonova, 2018). This leads to the question of whether AI systems, which rely on representation and abstraction, can meaningfully participate in such processes of knowing.

Copilot currently recognizes tacit knowledge as intrinsically human, and therefore, evidencing that AI falls off the tacit knowledge cliff (Simeonova, 2022). However, it is undeniable that

automation will hamper human expertise and learning, particularly at junior levels (Alavi et al., 2024). This suggests a temporal effect of AI use: When these junior levels are senior levels, they *would have relied on* automated knowledge and creativity, and *not on human creativity, curiosity, culture, experience and tacit knowledge*. Would tacit knowledge even develop where every solution is based on AI—which by definition is data driven—and not culturally, collectively or socially driven? Would the junior levels develop to senior levels? Or would junior or senior levels within organizations even exist? While the future of work has been a subject of interest among scholars (e.g. Sako, 2020), the opinions on the future of knowledge in the AI era are limited, therefore, the current conceptual perspective.

AI will participate in every aspect of people's lives, and it will perhaps change the social, emotional, cultural and collective practices of humans and for humans. People are already communicating with AI instead of other people. The question is what would that mean for humanity and how would the social, emotional, cultural, and collective practices change because of the AI, and because AI is now an integral part of these whether people realize it or not. Therefore, the question, and particularly for knowledge is: would any of these practices and experiences remain human only, particularly on the topic of knowledge and knowing?

To illustrate this point we can consider the following real-life example. AI can create a recipe in seconds; however, it does not go through the practice of cooking (not yet), nor does it go through the experience of eating. The creativity of AI is undeniable, however—while the outputs are creative, AI does not go through a creative process, where the creative process for humans is fuelled by curiosity, culture and social richness, experiences, which, while not always logical or rational, are emancipatory and vital for humanity.

If we were to pause and think about the experience of eating food and the culture of socializing through food, where food is a means, not an end. AI can create a product and produce an outcome, however, cannot substitute the process of eating as a socializing activity and as social and collective experience. It is precisely in such informal, social and collective settings where knowledge and innovation are created (Simeonova, 2018). It is where collective intelligence emerges. Which is very topical to the inaugural issue of Collective Intelligence Perspectives.

Consider the following scenario. You are in a restaurant. You order via the restaurant app. Robots have taken over as chefs, where robotics has advanced enough to cook the food. Robots then serve the food. If the whole food experience is automated, would restaurants exist as we know them? Would restaurants even exist? Would people go out to restaurants? Or would robotics advance to a point where the smart fridge cooks your food and there is no need to go out to restaurants any longer? Are restaurants about food *per se*, or are these *about experiences*: social, emotional and cultural experiences, experienced by humans often as a group and a collective?

Building on this, I suggest that: Automating knowledge and experiences is not going to necessarily lead people to having more enriched and emancipatory lives. It quite possibly could lead to people having more tasks, less curiosity, less creativity, and fewer meaningful experiences, with higher levels of cognitive overload.

Therefore, I postulate that *knowing includes craft, intuition, creativity, curiosity and tacit knowledge*, all of which are bounded by *social, emotional, contextual, cultural and collective experiential practices, which would describe collective intelligence*.

The future of knowledge is intrinsically human—framed by *social, emotional, contextual, cultural and collective experiential practices, tacit knowledge and knowing*, not by knowledge possessed by AI and advanced robotics.

Therefore, I emphasize *knowing as lived, relational, social, cultural, collective experience*, and not simply as something that is possessed and can be automated by an AI. Therefore, caution is needed in over-automation of knowledge.

I conclude this *conceptual reflection* on the future of knowledge with a normative recommendation—to actively consider human traits such as tacit knowing, socializing, culture, emotion, and collective intelligence in the AI era.

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Received February 5, 2026; revised manuscript accepted by Senior Editor Sven-Volker Rehm on April 18, 2026 (*editorial review*).

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Collective Intelligence Perspectives

ISSN 3055-7615

ci-perspectives.org

Published by the **Society for Managerial and Social Cybernetics**

Gesellschaft für Wirtschafts- und Sozialkybernetik (GWS)

gws-kybernetik.org