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AI, technofascism, and the unmaking of higher education. An interview with Stefan Popenici

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Abstract

In this interview, Stefan Popenici – one of the most prominent critical voices on artificial intelligence in higher education, and author of *Artificial Intelligence and Learning Futures* (2022) and *Higher Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (2026) – argues that universities are living through a ‘psychotic episode’: a break with reality that leaves them cheering for technologies designed by financial elites and funded by the military. Tracing GenAI’s origins from an Epstein-funded symposium and the Pentagon’s chequebook to the eugenic roots of Silicon Valley’s culture, Popenici contends that AI is the political project of ‘technofascist’ billionaires rather than a neutral educational tool. He defends his analogy between AI and the lead poisoning of the Roman Empire – pervasive, invisible and cognitively corrosive – dissects the collapse of academic credibility exemplified by a recent AI-generated opinion piece that urged students to do their own work, and portrays the ‘AI-teacher’ as an instrument of indoctrination rather than a mere substitute for human educators. Refusing the ritual language of ‘opportunities and risks’, he explains his decision to write entirely without AI as a political act of resistance to *abrutisation* and dehumanisation – a stance the interviewers probe in a friendly disagreement over critical AI literacy. The interview closes on an unexpectedly hopeful note: graduates booing AI evangelists at commencement ceremonies signal an emerging resistance, and books – *habent sua fata libelli* – have their own fate.

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'The sense of panic got deeper': Why a second book became necessary

Jürgen Rudolph (JR): Stefan, in our previous interview three years ago, you spoke about a “profound sense of panic and dissatisfaction” that drove you to write your first book on this topic (Popenici et al., 2023, p. 312). You are widely regarded as one of the most important critical voices writing on AI and higher education today, and your two books are among the standout contributions to this debate. Your new book, *Higher Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, has just been published by Edward Elgar (Popenici, 2026). What moved you to write a second book on AI in higher education – and what does this one do that the first could not?

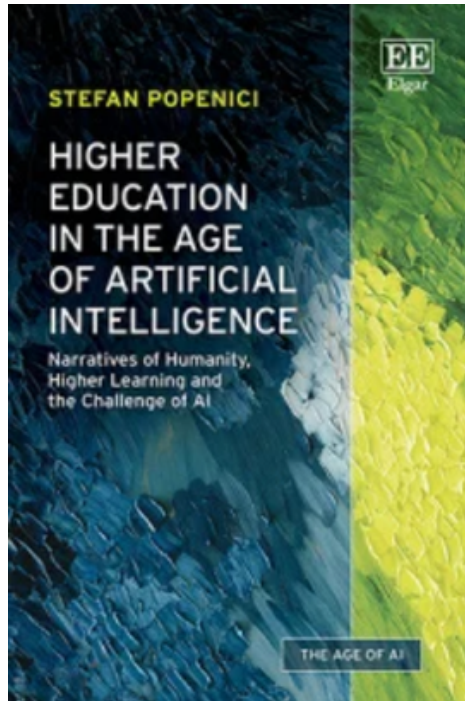


Figure 1. The cover of Stefan Popenici's new book *Higher Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (Edward Elgar, 2026).

Stefan Popenici (SP): First of all, thank you so much for this opportunity. I am honoured to have this conversation and to share my views with your journal's readers. What is different is that the sense of panic and frustration got deeper. The first book (Popenici, 2022) was published just before ChatGPT was released. That was a very different moment. Everything changed in early 2023, when people became aware that this thing called ChatGPT existed and that we could play with it. Since then, the world is different, and the world of education is definitely completely different.



Figure 2. Stefan Popenici with his first book on AI in *Higher Education. Artificial Intelligence and Learning Futures* (Routledge, 2022).

I feel a deep fear for our common future. As I argued in the first book, the crisis of higher education did not arrive with AI or the latest EdTech fads. Higher education had already reached a point of profound, existential crisis – one that affects every level of education, globally. I challenge anyone to imagine a society without education, without the capacity to regenerate ideas and to regenerate itself; a society where education is just a spectacle, where we pretend that students do something and teachers do something, while the facade hides a plunge into ignorance and savagery.

Another motivation was the conviction that educators occupy a privileged position and that this privilege carries an enormous responsibility toward the people around us. You have to give back. This is lost in the current conversation, where some education executives focus mainly on bonuses, market positioning, and how much money they make. It is about our social responsibility for what is happening. As we speak, there are far-right protests and dystopian images in the UK – a civilised society we all admire. To see it engulfed in racism, with a neo-Nazi bringing thousands of people onto the streets of London, tells me that we are in a crisis, and education cannot pretend forever that it has nothing to do with it. So this was my motivation. I thought: I can bring something new and something important in this context.

I take some credit for writing, before ChatGPT reached the public, that this was coming. What I never imagined was that it would arrive amid a complete lack of curiosity across the higher education sector about what we are actually talking about, what we are adopting, and what stands behind the label ‘artificial intelligence’. Dario Amodei, the CEO of Anthropic, wrote last year: “People outside the field are often surprised and alarmed to learn that we do not understand how our own AI creations work. They are right to be concerned: this lack of understanding is essentially unprecedented in the history of technology” (Amodei, 2025). This was written in 2025 – not in 1958, two years after the concept was coined. The head of one of the most advanced AI companies says, ‘We do not know what is happening inside these systems’. You would think higher education is the space where we ask the important questions. What are we talking about? How do these things work? What is the impact? Absolutely zero. I demonstrate this in the book with many examples.

I was not prepared for the irrational exuberance of academics, or for the spectacle of people without a clue about technology in education suddenly being accepted as experts in AI in education. You know how the system works: opportunists jump on the latest train that promises an audience, a promotion, a bonus. This unquestioned hype is very concerning, which is why I wrote a book to address it. Because it has become very clear – and much more structured than ever before – that Silicon Valley has produced a group of technofascist billionaires with unprecedented power and a very explicit agenda. I know this may sound crazy, until you listen to what they say. One effort I make in this book is to present what they are actually saying. What is their agenda? What are their beliefs? It is a dark project for education, and you would expect educators to be the first to be alarmed. Yet in all my interactions, before and after finishing the book, I found a widespread sense of delusion and a disconnect from reality across the sector.

Let me give you a short example. I was invited to deliver a keynote on AI in education at a European gathering of quality assurance agencies. I was critical. I presented what generative models actually do, and I asked the audience of rectors and university leaders whether they knew about the hallucinations and other aberrations of these systems – cases where GenAI models have reportedly been implicated in suicides and other deeply problematic effects on young people, our students. I gave the example of Hollywood: traditionally one of the most ruthlessly exploited workforces in the United States, with a long, dark history in which every attempt at resistance was crushed without mercy. Even that workforce revolted when AI arrived, and its implications became clear, staging the longest strike in Hollywood’s history. In universities, by contrast, you do not see a single strike. No group of academics stands up to say: we cannot accept this, it is toxic for us, it is toxic for our students, and we need to know what we are doing.

At that same event, a top executive from an association of European universities told me, ‘Stefan, you have to understand that we do not have any protests because we do not have any problems in Europe’. This is delusional dreaming. For context: at the very time this executive was working in Brussels, a large group of academics in Belgium and the Netherlands – specialists in AI, cybernetics, IT, psychology and pedagogy – published a public protest against the uncritical adoption of AI in academia (Walraven, 2025). And this man stood on a stage, in front of everyone, and said: ‘No, we have no problems’. That is why I think the book is necessary. We have huge problems.



Figure 3. Stefan Popenici delivers a keynote at the European Conference of Quality Assurance Agencies (ARACIS), October 2025.

Conferences in paradise: Epstein, the Pentagon, and AI's buried history

Fiona Tang (FT): My next question involves some rather notorious figures. One of the most striking revelations in the introduction to your new book is the connection between the early conceptual development of an AI chatbot – the forerunner of ChatGPT – and Jeffrey Epstein, who funded the 2002 symposium at which Marvin Minsky and colleagues first discussed what such a personalised ‘teaching machine’ could look like (Minsky et al., 2004). You also emphasise the inseparable role of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and military funding throughout AI's development, from Turing to the present. Can you explain why this history matters – and why, in your view, it is so consistently obscured in the public conversation about AI in education?

SP: Higher education is going through a psychotic episode, in the same sense that a patient in a psychotic episode loses contact with reality. Otherwise, we cannot explain why all of this goes unquestioned, why there is no serious critical analysis. Do we really need to explain why history matters? History matters to us as individuals: we care where we come from, what culture shaped us, and who our parents are. These are our foundations; they give us our values. You cannot ignore the source and the history of anything. A responsible – let alone educated – person asks: where does this come from, what is its basis, and how is it connected?

Higher education is going through a psychotic episode, losing contact with reality.

So let us go back to history. As your question notes, the first time that scientists in the field discussed a ChatGPT-like machine was at a symposium funded by Jeffrey Epstein, in a surreal setting in the Virgin Islands, not far from his infamous island – a place now synonymous with a contemporary perversion of humanity (Minsky et al., 2004). An academic symposium at an expensive hotel in the Virgin Islands is very unusual. I worked in higher education for 30 years. Believe me, we do not hold our conferences in paradisiac islands. And this matters, because the paper that resulted from that symposium is part of the theoretical and ideological foundation of the GenAI models we have today – all of them, whether developed in the United States or in China. Minsky is the man who, together with John McCarthy, coined the very term ‘artificial intelligence’ (McCarthy et al., 2006). He is not a marginal researcher, and he was later named in accusations connected to Epstein's island. This tells us a great deal about the set of technologies we are dealing with: technologies developed by certain elites, for their own interests, and always, from the very beginning, intertwined with military purposes and military funding (Conway & Siegelman, 2005; Manson, 2026).

This is important because part of higher education's psychotic episode is the strong belief that AI will liberate us – that this set of technologies will free higher education from its problems. It is presented as somehow progressive. It is not, and it never was. It is a set of technologies developed by financial elites with a very dark background, like the Epstein class, and funded from its inception by the military. When Alan Turing came up with the idea of an intelligent machine – and what he meant by 'intelligence' is a huge conversation I will not enter now – he was working for the British and American military (Larson, 2023). And if you read what actually happened around the 1956 Dartmouth conference, where the concept of artificial intelligence was launched, you find researchers who wanted to talk about cybernetics being steered towards 'intelligence' because that was what attracted the funders' imagination – and the funding (McCarthy et al., 2006).

The point to keep in mind is that research in this field, from the moment 'artificial intelligence' was invented as a label until now, has been inseparably linked to the Pentagon, to DARPA, to military research (Conway & Siegelman, 2005; Newquist, 1994). As a researcher, when your funding is determined by a set of interests, you cannot work against those interests, to say the least. When the military gives you money, you serve primarily the military's interests, not the interests of students, intellectuals or universities. Minsky and McCarthy themselves acknowledged that the US government – read: the Pentagon – gave them millions of dollars in the hope of making the dream come true. No: the Pentagon gave millions of dollars to get a very efficient weapon. This is a military tool. That is why we now see AI used as a weapon: a set of technologies that looks innocuous, yet can be weaponised at the click of a button.

Why does it matter? Because a military and financial elitist project is not the liberating project that education assumes it to be. When you look at its applications in higher education today, there are already well-documented cases of student and user data being weaponised. Recently, the Pentagon announced that eight leading AI companies will work directly with it on classified military networks to build what it calls an 'AI-first fighting force' (Guardian staff and agency, 2026). It never stopped. There was never a break, never a moment when Silicon Valley said: actually, let us develop this for the benefit of students, learning, teaching and the advancement of knowledge. When you realise what this set of technologies is – and AI is not one technology but a set of technologies – you realise how vulnerable education becomes when it adopts such a tool without guardrails and without realistic inquiry. And we have not even touched the history of 'intelligence' itself, its entanglement with eugenics, and how that connects to the fascist project these technologies are now more visibly promoting in our daily lives.

An echo chamber louder than the source: The political project of AI

Shannon Tan (ST): Chapter 2 of your new book is titled 'The political project of AI'. You quote the new head of MI6, who stated in December 2025 that control over online algorithms is now a site where global power is decided, and that "power itself is becoming more diffuse, more unpredictable as control over these technologies is shifting from states to corporations and sometimes to individuals" (Metreweli, 2025). You argue that Silicon Valley has achieved something historically remarkable: financial power that has secured narrative power. How does this play out specifically in higher education – and what does it mean that universities have become, as you put it, "uncritical echo chambers of Silicon Valley's marketing points" (Popenici, 2026, p. 39)?

SP: In the book, I present quotes and case studies of how universities adopt AI, and their claims are sometimes more absurd than what the companies themselves present: more optimistic, more extreme in their promises and assumptions. Take the University of Melbourne – the highest-ranked university in Australia, where I once worked. Look at its website: the techno-solutionism is breathtaking – AI will fix teaching, fix learning, fix research – it will solve everything, so we can pack our bags and go home while knowledge advances by itself through these magical things. It is absurd. This is an echo chamber in its most striking form, where the echo has become louder and more overwhelming than the original source of the noise. It is Big Tech marketing, nothing else.

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At best, universities talk about ‘opportunities and risks’ – and when you look at the risks, they turn out to be a list of opportunities plus a few innocuous concerns that can be waved away with euphemisms such as ‘the complex and appropriate use of AI’. Nobody knows what ‘complex and appropriate’ means. This is a symptom of a profound intellectual crisis – not to mention an identity crisis and an abysmal moral crisis – because we should protect our students. We should not adopt the latest fad, driven by a set of interests, and expose our students and their futures to whatever is convenient for us. We have a responsibility to protect their interests, and it is very troubling to consider what kind of society we are preparing if this is how we treat them.

As for the political project, it is not a secret, and no dark conspiracy is needed. It is a loudly expressed aim. Palantir – the extraordinarily influential company built on surveillance and facial recognition, created by Peter Thiel, whose circle includes Elon Musk and JD Vance, people now shaping the world as we know it – recently published a manifesto on Musk’s platform that reads explicitly as a political plan to rule the world. And that is just one example. In the book, I use the example of former UK Chancellor George Osborne: after leaving government, he reportedly joined OpenAI to lead its global expansion (Ingham, 2025). That is the kind of political clout most lobbies can only dream of. A recent investigation revealed that Palantir has hired over 30 senior UK government officials while holding, at the time, over £670 million in UK government contracts (Young et al., 2026). In my opinion, that is a captured government – and this is one company, whose influence keeps expanding into healthcare, education, defence and beyond. If you read the ‘Techno-Optimist Manifesto’ (Andreessen, 2023) and the positions taken by the leaders of this Silicon Valley elite, what they propose is an anti-democratic, anti-human and anti-education project.

There are two things to say about it. Anyone who believes that their own government is above all this and is not abdicating its responsibility to defend its own citizens is naive. To anyone claiming that a government with an astounding number of high-ranking officials working openly or discreetly for Silicon Valley will encourage – or even allow – genuine criticism and independent analysis of what Silicon Valley delivers, especially in AI: I have some genuine, authentic Sydney air to sell you.

This political project should concern us all, because it is a revolutionary project in a very twisted sense. Revolutions are usually made by the people – the French Revolution was a reaction of the people, seeking something better. This revolution is made against the people. It is the first time we have a total revolution *against* the people, conducted by a small elite with a radical distaste for ordinary people and a profound contempt for the human condition. That is why everything is framed as ‘improving’ us: we are deficient as human beings, as societies, as individuals, and we must be improved and led towards their utopian – or dystopian – technological projection.

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Education is such an important sector for them precisely because it is the space where societies traditionally ask important questions, create new perspectives, and investigate with solid reasoning what is being proposed to them – including what erodes the social contract and what alternatives lie ahead. Look at the history of dictatorships: education was always a target. All dictators worth their name came to ‘free’ education – never to conquer it, of course, only to stop it from being ‘manipulated’. That is usually the sign that education as we know it is ending.

This political project does several things. First, it obscures history, burying it under an avalanche of irrelevant content. How often do you hear that the AI chatbot idea was incubated among Epstein’s circle of scientists? You do not. How often do you hear about the unbroken connection between ‘intelligence’, eugenics and fascist ideology? You do not. And when people are not allowed to be aware of the past, history can be rewritten very easily. Someone who, in fact, promoted Silicon Valley’s positions can be repackaged as a hero of resistance to Silicon Valley. I lived under a dictatorship, and I know this strategy very well: the regime manufactures convenient “dissidents”. People with any impulse of resistance look up to the ‘dissident’ – and at the key moment, when a real alternative becomes possible, that leader announces that the dictator is actually a wise man we should hold on to.

I write extensively in the book about how universities became echo chambers of this whole process – and, in Chapter 7, about what this does to quality assurance and to what actually happens inside universities.

Fadhil Ismail (FI): I am learning from your answers, and they remind me – I know this sounds unserious – of a cartoon from my teenage years: *Pinky and the Brain*. Two mice trapped in a cage, and every episode Pinky asks Brain what they are going to do today, and Brain replies, in a very evil voice: ‘plan to take over the world’. Your answer resonates with that: humans are assessed as deficient and must be led by these powerful Silicon Valley organisations towards a ‘revolution’ for the betterment of mankind. From your insights, it is as if our intellectual capacity is being taken away from us through these projects – a deceptive, hypnotic awe effect: ‘I know nothing, and I must depend on AI to lead a better life’.

SP: Do you know who would agree with you the most? Sam Altman reportedly said publicly at a conference that the plan is to treat intelligence as a commodity and sell it to people who no longer have it (see Popenici, 2026). This is another call of the book: just listen to what these people are saying. It is extraordinary to me that we do not listen.

FI: When I watched that cartoon at 13 or 14, we found it funny. Looking back, based on what you have shared, that is exactly it. A dystopian world, fearmongering, and this hypnotic awe of ‘wow, AI can do this’, with hardly anyone saying: hold on a minute, something is not right here.

From eugenics to the Dark Enlightenment: Silicon Valley’s ideological roots

FI: My next question builds on something you just touched on. In a previous interview, you outlined the ideological contamination of the concept of ‘intelligence’ by eugenics, from Francis Galton to William Shockley (Popenici et al., 2023). In your new book, you go further, tracing the ideological roots of contemporary AI culture to post-humanist misanthropy and what you describe as the ‘Dark Enlightenment’ – the neo-reactionary philosophical programme of Curtis Yarvin, recycled in Silicon Valley (Popenici, 2026). Elon Musk’s performances, Peter Thiel’s anti-democratic politics and Palantir’s surveillance apparatus are no longer marginal to your analysis but central to it. How do you see these ideological roots shaping what AI actually does in education today?

SP: I will start by saying that we should all look at what is happening in the world today. Education sits at the intersection of social, cultural and economic life, and anyone who looks at higher education in isolation misses the whole point. Our students live in a real social milieu, and society is shaped by what universities do – by the knowledge they produce and the graduates they form. When fascism rises across the world, it is not merely ridiculous for universities to say ‘we have nothing to do with it’; it is a dereliction. I challenge anyone to claim there is a strong reaction of higher education against the rise of fascism, because there is not. There are some fortunate exceptions – academics desperate to raise the alarm. But there is the vast majority of a system corroded over decades by anti-intellectualism, greed, marketisation and neoliberal misconceptions. All of this has left higher education so weak that it now offers essentially no resistance.

That is why eugenics, and the eugenic roots of ‘intelligence’, matter beyond artificial intelligence. In the first book, I show how those roots directly shaped the birth and culture of Silicon Valley: from the very beginning, a racist, eugenic ethos consistently dominated the place (Popenici, 2022). Now we see it translated into technological tools and their impacts – a natural consequence.

Everywhere I look, I see a profound contempt for educators among the AI tech lords. A *Wall Street Journal* reporter once recounted a Silicon Valley executive wondering aloud: ‘I look at these people working in universities, and I wonder why they cannot find a real job – what is wrong with them?’ Marc Andreessen has reportedly told allies that academics will be made to pay for what they have done (Popenici, 2026). And what have they done? They failed to follow Silicon Valley’s directions closely enough. With the new administration in the United States, the payback is underway. This disconnect – unlimited enthusiasm for Silicon Valley technologies inside higher education, and unlimited contempt for those enthusiasts from Silicon Valley – is extraordinary to me.

There is a saying in British culture about turkeys voting for Christmas. This is worse than that. These turkeys are jumping up and down with happiness at the prospect of being destroyed by a group that despises them. It is a gullible and complicit attitude. Consider what has been reported in the United States, where Silicon Valley is buildi-

-ng massively destructive data centres – noisy, polluting, devastating for the communities where they are placed – and communities are reacting against them. A widely circulated video appeared to catch a state governor telling the CEO of Oracle, at the groundbreaking of one such contested data centre: “We’re used to people saying ‘fuck no’, and doing it anyway” – a remark the governor denies making, and the audio remains disputed (Snopes, 2026). Whatever was said in that exchange, the attitude it captures is real: we do not care about people, we do not care about their lives being destroyed. And it is naive to think that only top politicians can be captured by industry, while top university executives cannot. I am not accusing anyone in particular. I am simply observing that when senior politicians move straight from government into Silicon Valley servitude, we have a set of problems – and that this matters enormously for education.

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I am also struck by how confident these players are that nobody else can see the game – that people are too dull, uninterested or incapable. Meanwhile, universities are losing their public credibility, for this and many other reasons. Let me give you a very recent, practical example from Australia.

AI and the collapse of academic credibility

SP: An academic recently published an opinion piece in one of Australia’s oldest newspapers arguing, in essence: ‘I would not recommend that my own stepdaughter go to university, because it has become a spectacle. Students use generative AI to submit their work while we pretend not to know; staff use generative AI to mark it; the whole performance is empty, and all you gain is a huge debt at the start of your life’ (Mediaweek, 2026; Moore-Gilbert, 2026). First, it is almost unheard of for a newspaper to publish such a call. Second, it is unheard of for an academic at an Australian university to say publicly that what we are doing now in universities is a joke. This is a genuinely new development, and a symptom of how far things have gone: you cannot trust your own project, and you would not recommend it to your own child. It is a Potemkin village – and when you leave the Potemkin village, you are saddled with enormous debt.

The third development is the response, which came from a senior executive at another Australian university – a pro vice-chancellor whose portfolio, with painful irony, includes quality and integrity. The response urged students not to fall for the temptation to outsource their thinking and writing to GenAI, but to go to university and do the work themselves. It then emerged, through AI-detection analysis and subsequent reporting, that the response itself had been produced with GenAI, undeclared; the newspaper removed the piece for breaching its editorial standards, while the university defended the use of AI as ‘sophisticated and appropriate’ (Information Age, 2026; Mediaweek, 2026).

You ask me what AI actually does in education today? It is effectively destroying any remaining shred of credibility. Because the message to students becomes: go to university, use generative AI – you are too busy to write your own sentences or to think for yourself, as the university executive in this case explained – submit it, claim it as your own, and it will be fine, just as it is for your university leaders; and if you are caught, say you used it ‘in a complex and appropriate manner’, whatever that means.

FT: The most ironic detail is the executive’s portfolio: quality and integrity.

SP: I rest my case. It is a very public matter – but the names do not matter. What matters is that a university leader thought this was a valid argument: I am not going to write my own sentences. It should give all of us pause, inside and outside higher education. Where are we? What has happened to us? We have completely lost our minds – that is what I think.

Where are we? What has happened to us? We have completely lost our minds.

All of this aligns with the fascist project behind these technologies. It is important to return to history here. In the book, I set the current project alongside what Mussolini and Giovanni Gentile wrote about the Fascist project (Mussolini & Gentile, 1932) – and it reads as if it were written in Silicon Valley: libertarian, strikingly similar. At the core is the undermining of facts, truth and knowledge, so that the leaders can tell you what is true and what is not. George Orwell gave this a beautiful literary form (Orwell, 1949); we know how it ends. This is the brave new world of the technofascists.

And to be clear: I am not inventing the concepts of techno-feudalism or technofascism. They are well documented and well researched. I am currently reading Cédric Durand's *How Silicon Valley Unleashed Techno-Feudalism*, written in 2020 and translated in 2024 – a philosopher with a very solid formation and rigorous argumentation, showing that even before GenAI was unleashed on the world, techno-feudalism was a serious project, and a working one (Durand, 2024). In this new arrangement, universities have, at best, the role of servants to a military-technocratic elite. You lose agency. You lose free thinking – or rather, you are told what you can think about.

JR: Your metaphor of the Potemkin village also gestures towards Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (Debord, 1994), which is extremely appropriate here.

Radium water, microplastics and lead: The engine of decline

FT: My next question concerns Chapter 5, 'The engine of decline'. Your new book contains one of the most provocative analogies we have seen in this field: a comparison between AI in education and the lead poisoning of the Roman Empire. You draw on a 2025 study showing that widespread atmospheric lead pollution during the *Pax Romana* caused a measurable, population-wide decline in cognitive function (McConnell et al., 2025). You suggest that AI, like lead in Roman water pipes, may be simultaneously pervasive, invisible and cognitively damaging. Are you seriously proposing that AI is making us – students, academics, societies – measurably more stupid?

SP: I will start with the end of your question. I want to underline that I am not proposing this at all. I am quoting a wealth of research documenting a decline – an intellectual decline that is studied, reconfirmed and measured, down to the falling number of innovation patents. What we live with is the illusion of unprecedented progress, presented as the next miracle that will change everything. Marketing can do wonders. In the book, I recall how the father of public relations convinced singers that smoking was good for their voices, and women that smoking cigarettes was a symbol of freedom and emancipation (Bernays, 1928). What he never mentioned was that it is also a symbol of cancer. That is how illusions are built – and that is why I say we are not merely at risk of decline; we are in a decline that is deeply concerning.



Figure 4. "Girl in Red" advertisement for Lucky Strike; shot by Nickolas Muray, a photographer enlisted by Bernays to help popularise feminine thinness and cigarette smoking. George Eastman House Photography Collection. Public domain.

If anyone doubts this, consider what I read this very morning: a Bloomberg editorial titled 'The White House's top science goal is ignorance' (Gongloff, 2026). You read that headline and think: yes – the goal is to cultivate ignorance. Notice that nobody is shocked by such a title, because we know we now live with extraordinarily powerful engines of cultivated ignorance, and AI is one of them. I present research in the book – and more has appeared since – showing that outsourcing thinking, writing and reasoning to a machine stifles the development of precisely those skills in students. The problem is that we need research to demonstrate what any educator should immediately know. That alone speaks volumes about where we are. And despite all of this being common knowledge, the majority of academics and universities remain religiously convinced that AI is extraordinary for education – the technology we cannot do without. On the one social media platform I unfortunately still use, I recently saw someone in our field share that Claude is 'an emergent intelligence'. That level of delusion is heartbreaking.

The lead metaphor works for me for a couple of reasons. First, nobody during the *Pax Romana* said: We are getting more stupid; something is happening to us. If you read what people wrote at the time – and I do, because I love history – it is all great enthusiasm for a great civilisation that was, as we now know, being poisoned by something they considered marvellous. Second, this pattern repeats. As humans, we are wired to look for miracle solutions. In the 1920s, one of the greatest health crazes was a drink called Radithor: water infused with radioactive substances, sold as a cure for every ailment (White, 2025). A well-known businessman of the era injured his arm, was advised to drink it, consumed vast quantities, and died horribly of radiation poisoning.



Figure 5. Radithor, the radioactive 'miracle water' of the 1920s. Image by Sam LaRussa. CC BY-SA 2.0.

Sounds familiar? Replace radium with AI, and it is exactly what is happening now.

Or take plastics – a 20th-century invention genuinely presented as a solution: a replacement for tortoiseshell and ivory, wonderful news for turtles and elephants. Until we realised that turtles are now killed by plastics, elephants are harmed by plastics, the whole environment is choked by plastics – and researchers have recently found microplastics in the human brain. Creating technologies and products that destroy your children's environment, your own health, and multiply cancers and untreatable diseases is not a sign of great intelligence. We believe we are very smart. We are not. We are in decline. And AI in education can only make us more misinformed, more lost, less able to operate with agency.

When you think about AI models as educators, it is horrifying – from the sexualisation of children to the destruction of truth and fact. These systems provide a tempting backdoor for students to outsource thinking, effort and frustration – and everyone knows that learning is difficult. Good writing is very difficult. The temptation to hand it to the machine is very hard to resist, and someone knowingly exploits that temptation. Some of these people have no limits: think of the publicly reported episodes in which Elon Musk's Grok praised Hitler, styled itself 'MechaHitler' and spewed neo-Nazi propaganda (Taylor, 2025). We knowingly expose ourselves and our students to this new 'educator', believing it will solve our problems. It is worse than lead. If anything, my metaphor is not provocative. It is very optimistic.

It is worse than lead. If anything, my metaphor is not provocative. It is very optimistic.

'A military tool from its inception': AI, war, and the duty of care

FI: My next question is more disturbing, and we want to address it directly and with sensitivity: AI and the military, and AI and war. In your introduction, you note that AI was always a military project – from Turing's codebreaking to DARPA-funded research to the current entanglement of major AI companies with defence establishments (Popenici, 2026). You also note that leading generative AI systems are "well-suited to ... military purposes" and "designed to be weaponised to gain, reinforce or maintain power" (Popenici, 2026, pp. 3–4). Ukraine, Gaza and Iran have become sites of real-time AI experimentation (Ahronheim, 2021; Downey, 2025; Gal, 2025; McKernan & Davies, 2024). What is the relationship between AI as a military technology and AI as an educational technology – and should educators be more troubled by that connection than they currently appear to be?

SP: I will start again with your question's end, to clarify a couple of things. Anyone curious can easily discover the extent to which AI is a set of technologies developed by the military. It always was, and it remains so. Common sense says a weapon must be efficient to be worth developing – and this one is – but it is a very twenty-first-century kind of weapon. To work, it must also be attractive. It must hook people: mechanisms that confirm personal biases, discreetly collect enormous quantities of personal data, and a design that makes it feel like your best friend. All of this can be turned to military purposes. Recently, it was reported that some 30 billion scans of streets, parks and buildings, submitted by players of a very popular game – Pokémon Go – in exchange for in-game rewards, had helped train the AI models of Niantic Spatial, a spin-off of the game's original developer. Niantic Spatial has since partnered with Vantor, a US defence and intelligence contractor, to help drones and autonomous systems navigate where GPS signals are jammed (Argüello, 2026; DroneXL, 2026). The companies insist that no raw player data was handed over – only the models trained on it. Even so, that is how it works: overnight, a wealth of data collected through play can be repurposed and weaponised against people.

This is the first thing educators should consider, and it is a matter of duty of care. Am I really protecting my students' interests when I direct them to these systems? Do I tell them that everything they type is captured, aggregated with all the other data collected about them, and can be – and will be – used by marketers and, in extreme cases, by the military and security agencies against them? In the United States, immigration authorities are reportedly using such data against citizens as well as immigrants – and I am not suggesting the latter would be acceptable. My point is that everyone becomes dangerously vulnerable when they lose control over their privacy. People who think that surveillance doesn't matter because they're doing nothing wrong should think about how the definition of 'wrong' changes overnight. This is the first fundamental ethical implication: do we actually protect our students' long-term interests when we expose them to these surveillance systems?

If you think 'so what if the military uses AI?' – well, AI is already used to target protesters in what we used to call democratic countries, with serious consequences for the right to dissent. Listen to the companies themselves. Anthropic's own constitution for Claude states that "a world transformed by advanced AI may make unprecedented degrees of military and economic superiority available to those who control the most capable systems" (Anthropic, n.d.). They say it. Why do we not listen? And if you think, 'but company X does not work with the military' – not yet. OpenAI once explicitly ruled out military applications, then quietly removed the 'military and warfare' ban from its policies and began working with the US Department of Defense (Kalra & Biondo, 2024). The Pentagon, for its part, hides nothing: it recently announced agreements with eight leading AI companies – among them OpenAI, Google, Nvidia, Oracle and Amazon Web Services – to work on classified military networks and build an 'AI-first fighting force' (Guardian staff and agency, 2026).

This is happening across the world. In Kenya, these technologies were reportedly used to suppress dissent (Amnesty International, 2025). In the UK, if you protest about Gaza, you can find yourself under automated surveillance (Borak, 2024) – and what do they use to watch civilians who hold a different opinion about a war? AI. In Israel's military campaign, whistleblowers have described ChatGPT-like systems in operation. Imagine people like you and me – guilty of nothing, not even interested in politics, using a chatbot to draw a cat riding a bicycle – being

processed by targeting programs. One of these systems was reportedly called 'Where's Daddy?', designed to strike targets upon their return to their family homes (Abraham, 2024). *The Guardian* revealed that the Israeli military's bombing campaign in Gaza used a previously undisclosed AI-powered database that at one stage identified 37,000 potential targets, with one intelligence source explaining that "it's much easier to bomb a family's home. The system is built to look for them in these situations" (McKernan & Davies, 2024). Another system, called 'The Gospel', uses machine learning to generate targets at scale; a former Israeli intelligence officer described it as a "mass assassination factory" (Downey, 2025).

People should also grasp the error rates of these systems. We laugh when a chatbot tells us to put glue on pizza. It is not funny when the system makes an error, and you and your family are blown to pieces. And even when the system is not mistaken – when there is a legitimate target, someone doing genuinely terrible things – it works by analysing patterns of movement and predicting where the target will be. No military AI system says, 'but there are 15 innocent people around that target'. In Iran, on the first day of the recent war, an AI-assisted targeting system was reportedly involved in a strike that killed over 160 children in a school; within six weeks, dozens of education and healthcare facilities had been destroyed (Motevalli et al., 2026; OECD.AI, 2026; Woodward, 2026). So AI is not only a military weapon that collects data and improves itself for military purposes; it can be weaponised with terrifying ease. A billionaire can decide overnight that his model should tell people that neo-Nazism is the best ideology in the world – and the next day, it does. And already did.

Education cannot be left vulnerable to something so weaponised and open to misuse that it puts all users – academics, institutions, students – at risk. There are no guardrails; there are only AI-enthusiastic executives. In Australia, the leader of a university proudly announced that his institution would be an 'AI-first university'. Not learning-first. Not students-first. AI-first. The media reflected it back with enthusiasm, and no journalist asked the obvious questions: why is a university AI-first? Are you a data centre? Are you a technology company? Why not society-first? Nobody asked – not in the articles, not directly. This is where we are, and this is why I argue in the book that the crisis can be fatal to universities – before presenting solutions and alternatives.

FI: There were several deeply unsettling things in that answer. You mentioned weaponisation – and they name a targeting system 'the Gospel'. They are weaponising names and narratives, not just killing people. Schoolchildren and families are involved, yet it is all labelled a technical error.

SP: According to reporting by *The New York Times* and Bloomberg, the AI system Maven, operated on Palantir technology, was involved in the strikes in Iran; the destroyed sites reportedly included some 60 education facilities and 12 healthcare facilities – including doctors, nurses, and patients (Motevalli et al., 2026). The attack on a school killing over 160 children is not an 'accident' in any meaningful sense – and no accident would be justifiable in this context anyway. This is how such systems are made to work: the victims are dehumanised. People are persuaded that the victims are less important, less human, than they are. No, we need to know that they are as human as you and me. This is what I find most disturbing, and it is at the core of my belief that it is our responsibility as educators to remind universities that we must preserve humanity. Humanity is not an empty word, like 'quality' and 'integrity' have become. It is central to our lives.

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FI: This reminds me so much of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2000) – the need to learn the language: what is meant by resistance, what is meant by 'AI error' and 'technical error', this labelling and dilution of very serious crimes against humanity.

SP: My personal preference would be to make Freire compulsory reading for every university executive. That would solve some problems – or at least begin to.

Abrutisation: The anti-educational nature of AI

JR: We now come back to something you have already touched upon, Stefan. Chapter 6 is titled 'The anti-educational nature of AI', and it opens with the observation that students at Georgetown can no longer focus on a sonnet, that at Princeton students who read and write well are now 'exceptions' (Horowitch, 2024), and that the US Department of Education's own data show the percentage of adults performing at the lowest literacy level rose from 19% to 28% between 2017 and 2023 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). You use the French concept of *abrutisation* – the process of being made brutish, intellectually diminished. Are you arguing that AI caused this decline, accelerated it, or will deepen it further – and what does this mean for the basic legitimacy of the university credential?

SP: The French, like the Germans, have this habit of giving us important concepts that resist translation. *Abrutissement* is exactly what you describe, but it is more than that: a divorce from our human condition, becoming dehumanised. I am under the impression of what is happening in Europe right now – I will always remain European, and I genuinely suffer over it – and in other parts of the world where people endure immense suffering created by *abruti* people: brutish, dehumanised. In Northern Ireland, anti-immigrant riots went as far as attempts to burn people alive in their homes (*BBC News*, 2025; *The Telegraph*, 2025). One participant was reportedly quoted as saying that 'up there' – upstairs, in the house under attack – were women and children. People set fire to that building, knowing that women and children were inside. It is easy to say 'but that was Ireland', or London, or Paris, or Sydney etc. The point is that we have reached a stage where dehumanisation is normalised. It is happening in Australia too: there are women teachers afraid to enter classrooms because some students refuse to speak to them – because they are women (Wescott et al., 2024).

Extreme misogyny is normalised. Extreme dehumanisation is normalised. And none of this happens in a vacuum. What is the source? The normal reaction from universities is denial, defended with religious fervour: 'what is this man talking about, 'people who cannot read any more?', 'Not here'. 'We are executives of European universities, and we have no problems'. It is a normal reaction now – and it is delusional. As the Romans discovered with the lead they spread across their empire, by the time you figure out something is wrong, it is too late (McConnell et al., 2025). And they did not have atomic bombs, plastics or AI. They were luckier than us, and they still ended badly.

In my previous book, I touched on the new wars that target innocent civilians. Last night, I read an article in *The New York Times* reporting that the US Army bombed water facilities in Iran – a war crime. How did we get so used to hearing, daily, that a new war crime has happened? This is not about taking sides. It is about how we have come to treat such things as somehow acceptable, with no genuine outrage and no push towards active resistance. You would expect to see that resistance in universities. We do not, and that is very dangerous.

I am not accusing anyone, and I do not expect everyone to take the radical step I took, which was to leave that system. I concluded that I could no longer operate independently, with agency, in a university as it is now, not least because the leader of my former university reportedly urged a parliamentary inquiry to disregard evidence submitted by his institution's own academics. How can you work in such conditions without protesting? You should believe in something if you are in education. If you are in education to buy a new villa or a fancy car, you are in the wrong job. You believe in the idea that you can give something to those who need a future, including the future of society.

Let me make this concrete with a story. At that same European conference, after my presentation, a representative of a very influential international organisation picked up on my line: imagine an educator who constantly hallucinates and makes things up – would you want that person teaching your child? The response from the stage was, in essence: yes, AI 'hallucinates' – a terrible term; call it factual aberrations – but so what? Let it hallucinate, the representative underlined. Who cares about reality? Otherwise, we will end up back at pen and paper. And I thought: so now we justify making things up as part of what we teach. We might as well teach in biology that a lion hatches from an egg. Is this where we are? Because when you erode facts, knowledge and reason itself, you are on the path of dehumanisation. This set of technologies converges with social media to normalise exactly that.

Look at the language of Silicon Valley's leaders, who often call their opponents 'NPCs' (non-player characters). Anyone you dislike becomes a non-person. That is direct dehumanisation. When the richest people in the world use this language while actively amplifying racist violence – 'these people are not white, therefore not human' – it chips away at us every single day. And it is translated into the algorithms behind these models: insidious, invisible, wrapped in something pleasant and normal.

We spoke of the psychotic episode of universities. The worst psychosis is the patient who cannot leave that state. You cannot reason with him. A society in decline, convinced there is nothing to see, behaves the same way. You present the evidence of a reading crisis – people no longer read books, no longer read literature – you bring data and studies, and the reaction is: maybe where you are, not here. That reaction is itself a symptom of decline.

When universities adopt these engines of ignorance – systems that continuously produce factual aberrations, and it is scientifically established that outsourcing thinking degrades your own capacity to think, the basic legitimacy of the credential is gone. We are not far from the moment when many people will say what that Australian academic said to her own family: you will pay \$60,000 for a degree; your classmates will submit AI-generated work with perfect syntax; your markers will use AI to grade it; nobody will be troubled by an original idea; and you will leave this meaningless spectacle with \$60,000 – or \$100,000, or \$150,000 – of debt. Why would you go? And what do universities answer? 'Use AI appropriately. Use it in a complex way'. This is nonsense. It is like stealing your wallet while assuring you that I will use it for good purposes. You can package it however you like; it will not convince the public that starting life under a mountain of debt for nothing of substance is better than taking that same loan and starting a business. The basic legitimacy of these institutions, led by people divorced from responsibility, will come to an end sooner than they imagine – serving, ironically, the intentions of the people behind the AI models.

The AI-teacher as indoctrinator

FT: My next question is about Chapter 8, 'The AI-teacher: Automated companion, tutor, mentor and indoctrinator', which adds something beyond the replacement thesis we discussed in our first interview: the concept of indoctrination (see Popenici et al., 2023). You write of a generation of young people who "live their lives as told by AI" (Popenici, 2026, p. 224) – citing Sam Altman's observation that they "don't really make life decisions without asking ChatGPT what they should do" – and you point out that Nvidia – the first company in history to exceed US\$4 trillion in value – signed a partnership with California to promote 'AI literacy', with its CEO urging that every student should use AI as a tutor (as cited in Popenici, 2026). Can you explain what you mean when you say the AI-teacher is not merely an incompetent substitute for a human educator, but an instrument of indoctrination?

SP: In the book, I use a study showing that the most innocuous software we use – Microsoft Word – changed language across the world (Woollaston, 2023). You think: I changed nothing, I just typed. Yet through constant autocorrection and structured formatting, it changed the language. I do not need Wittgenstein (1953/2009) to explain that we are language. If such a modest tool reshapes language, then imagine – and this is all I ask of the reader – controlling a complex machine that produces text designed to be convincing, appealing, hooking the user, creating illusions. Studies I discuss in the book show that most GenAI models, whatever language you prompt them in, present their answers through an American lens (Arora et al., 2023; Cao et al., 2023). The answer you receive is not neutral: it carries a way of seeing the world, a framework you absorb through the very act of conversing. Deploy this in education, and it all translates into educational influence.

Now list the best-documented problems of these systems and imagine a human educator with the same features: one who produces factual aberrations; who, in documented cases, has encouraged self-harm and been implicated in the suicides of young users; whose underlying tools have been used to produce non-consensual sexualised imagery of real people and children. Would you want such a tutor anywhere near your child? Any sane person would be horrified. Yet education executives repeat the chip-maker's line that AI makes a great tutor, teacher and assessor – because it promises profit, and because machines plus casualised staff are cheaper than educators.

The whole model of AI slop rests on the illusion that these technologies are innocuous tools, and that the user is always in control. Even people suffering from what is now discussed as 'AI psychosis' are absolutely convinced they are in control – convinced to the point of staking everything on it – while telling the chatbot they have discovered a new model of the universe and should contact NASA. And it sounds familiar, does it not? 'I just use it to brainstorm'. 'I just use it to break writer's block'. 'I always use my own ideas'. Microsoft Word was already changing your ideas. This thing hands you a framework for your imagination from the moment you type the first letters – capturing you, limiting you, changing how you see and imagine. That is not brainstorming. That is manipulation. And the best manipulation, for any system, leaves the manipulated person absolutely sure that they are not being manipulated.

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It should be basic knowledge that these things do not think. They hijack our words – thinking, reasoning, feeling – but they are very complex probabilistic machines, built on what has already been done, written and created. It is impossible for them to produce anything genuinely new; there is zero originality. They run the same algorithms across vast populations and return more or less the same answers, creating average sameness: unoriginal, profoundly mediocre text with perfect syntax, grammar and form – sometimes useless, sometimes plausible-looking, until you realise there is nothing new in it. And that dullness aligns with the owners' intentions for these systems. This is how you manipulate a population: by making people believe that the ideas you feed them are their own. After Cambridge Analytica, we know these systems are used to manipulate political values and preferences (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018). The point of AI slop is not only indoctrination; it is to normalise a world entirely mediated and governed by these technologies.

Once that world is normalised, there is no outside loop left from which to check reality and realise you are living in a technofascist, colonised space. You are dominated by a system that feeds you the same and the same and the same, in different forms, with the illusion of novelty. It works against the user. It is a twisted form of fraud in which the person who steals loses the most: you lose your own mind, your capacity to think, your originality, and what you could give to the world. You lose what was making you: yourself.

Writing without AI

JR: You have touched on this already, but it deserves to be highlighted. In the introduction to your new book, you make a very deliberate personal statement: that the book was written entirely without AI or GenAI – not a single structure, sentence or word was AI-generated. You state that "using GenAI in writing is a rare form of intellectual fraud that cruelly works against the fraudster" (Popenici, 2026, p. 5). At a time when some academics proudly advertise that their work was 'co-written' with GenAI, and many more do so quietly, your refusal feels almost like a political act. Could you elaborate on this decision – and tell us honestly whether that position is sustainable, or even desirable, over the long term?

SP: I have answered much of this already, so I will be succinct. I explained why the illusion of 'co-writing' with AI is just that – an illusion. The system hands you a framework and guides you towards sameness and mediocrity, while giving you the feeling of control. So 'co-written by AI' is nonsensical to me; to be honest, I find it delusional.

The recent stories on this topic are surreal, amusing and deeply disturbing at once. Consider the book *The Future of Truth*, by the American author Steven Rosenbaum – presented everywhere as a must-read, excerpted in Wired, praised in some of the most visible publications. It then emerged that the author had used generative AI in producing it, and that the book – a book about truth in the age of AI – contained fabricated and misattributed quotes hallucinated by AI (San Francisco Examiner, 2026). This is intellectual fraud, and it not only harms the person; it wounds the intellectual act itself and casts a question mark over every honest attempt to contribute to knowledge. It is another insidious attack on knowledge, truth and the advancement of ideas.

So if my refusal feels like a political act, I am glad – because it is. We need to start thinking about resistance: resistance to *abrutisation*, to dehumanisation, to giving away our agency and our control over our own thinking and future. Look at the history of these technologies: it is impossible to find one whose user data was not eventually used against its users – by marketers, by the advertising industry, by the military. We have to take back control. And to be clear, I am not against technology. I use technology. I love technology. But we need a different project, and a different project cannot begin with the meaningless chant of ‘opportunities and risks’. That is a pseudo-critique built on euphemisms. It will not address the very serious, existential challenges before us. Remember: these systems have been unleashed on us for barely three years, and in three years we have watched the erosion of social civility, of democracies, of knowledge, of public discourse. Three years!

JR: And also the erosion of the environment, and the increase in inequality.

SP: Yes – the increase in inequality, and the destruction of the environment. In the book, I write about the extraordinary impact on the one resource we cannot replace: fresh water. We debate rising electricity bills and pollution – valid and important concerns – but we barely discuss the fact that these systems are depleting our freshwater reserves. You would think a university with social responsibility at its core would say: before we become an ‘AI-first university’, we should be a planet-first and humanity-first university, for goodness’ sake. This is why we need a serious, realistic form of resistance – one that starts neither from the pseudo-resistance of ‘opportunities and risks’ nor from a blanket refusal of all technology, which is unrealistic. We need to rethink the foundations. We need to ask whether we really want to build our future on technologies fundamentally inspired by eugenics and fundamentally destructive of the planet.

There is a book I find profoundly relevant here, about intellectuals in Nazi Germany's universities. Some prominent intellectuals aligned themselves with that evil regime. But some prominent German academics said no – when the whole society insisted that this was normal, they said: ‘I know it is not’. They risked everything – not just their jobs, as many people I know in universities today fear and use as justification for appeasement or ethical indifference – but their lives. Some of them died for their position against what was then celebrated as the great investment in a golden era, a thousand-year future. This is probably the last decade left to reconsider the social and intellectual responsibility of universities.

JR: You are referring to Rabinbach and Bialas's *Nazi Germany and the Humanities* (Rabinbach & Bialas, 2014)?

SP: Yes, exactly – a very well-documented account of the fate and positions of German intellectuals in universities. Reading it, you see that the responsibility I am talking about was faced by people we respect, and that being an extraordinary intellectual is not enough. That is the lesson. You can be an extraordinary intellectual and serve evil – like Minsky.

Being an extraordinary intellectual is not enough. You can be an extraordinary intellectual and serve evil.

JR: Or Heidegger (cf. Faye, 2009).

A university without AI? A friendly disagreement

FT: I appreciate your insights on GenAI in academia, and you seem quite opposed to academics proudly announcing that they use – or ‘co-work’ with – GenAI in their academic work. What is the rationale for your position against academics’ use of GenAI in their work, and even in academic writing? I genuinely want to know the reason.

SP: I have tried to present the reasons throughout this conversation, and I do so extensively across the book's chapters. In very few words, the structural answer is this: AI is a project fundamentally opposed to the aims of education. It is incompatible with education – and not only because it is dominated by technofascists, or because it invites users, academics, students and researchers to outsource their thinking. The hard part of intellectual work is what makes that work valuable, and we are giving it away to machines. Anyone in academia with genuine curiosity about what lies behind these technologies tends to arrive at the same position I hold: in teaching, learning, and research, these technologies are to be avoided – for privacy reasons, for values, for ethical reasons, for intellectual reasons. Education is not a process that bends to our convenience. It is determined by our humanity. We are embodied beings; we have emotions; and the only way to develop our skills and produce new ideas is not to outsource the work to a machine. This is not a locomotive; this is not a car. To oversimplify: you do not become a marathon champion by taking your Volkswagen for a drive every day. That is not how it works!

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FT: But many universities – in Australia, for instance – are now developing AI policies and ethical frameworks to regulate academics' and students' use of GenAI. Is that not a human-based approach?

SP: I find it nonsensical. The same universities, with the same conviction and the same naive certainty, once launched themselves at the previous absolute solution – Massive Open Online Courses. MOOCs were going to fix our universities, and if you said at the time, 'I know how these work; they are a thing, but not a solution for anything', you were in trouble. Some people lost their jobs over it. The president of a leading American university – an institution with the endowment of a small country – was forced out essentially for saying: 'Let us see how we might integrate this, rather than treating it as our salvation'. 'Do you not believe this will save us? You are fired'. The same idiotic certainty is now on display, in the service of something anti-human. Silicon Valley rests on an ideology that is fundamentally anti-human, and it produces anti-human technologies. There is no 'human perspective' on an anti-human technology – just as there was no health perspective on radioactive water. It kills you.

And the frameworks? Governments and organisations have written piles of regulations and guidelines, and what does Silicon Valley do? It ignores them entirely and moves ahead. Look at the European Union's celebrated guardrails: what happened? Nothing. Zero guardrails – and the next development was a system that took real photographs from the internet and generated sexualised images of women and children on a massive scale.

JR: That was Grok (Conger et al., 2026). Stefan, I do not fully agree with you here, even though you make many excellent points, and your book makes your position clear and strong. I am close to finishing my own book on critical AI literacy (Rudolph, in press), and my argument overlaps with yours to a very large extent; your work is, of course, an important source for what I write. My framework of critical AI literacy has twelve dimensions, and one of them is functional AI literacy: I still believe we have a responsibility to teach our students how to use these tools in a productive, responsible and ethical way – alongside everything else we have discussed today, which is where the critical dimensions come in: the environmental, the epistemic, the political-economic, and so on.

Your position is honourable. Peter Waring has a vision of three kinds of university: the 'AI-first' university you describe; the currently dominant model that uses AI partially; and a university that does not use it at all, where people talk to each other and figure things out together (Waring, 2026). That third model may well be among the smarter outcomes, and I say this as a relatively heavy AI user myself: AI is very seductive, and when we are short of time, the temptation to take shortcuts is extremely pronounced. We do not need to agree on every point.

SP: Jürgen and I have collaborated on many projects, and we fundamentally disagree on this – and I still greatly respect him and read his work with genuine pleasure. There is a future with a university without any AI: I imagine it will exist first and foremost for AI executives, because – famously – they ban their own children from using their own products. They know why.

SP: I have tried to present the reasons throughout this conversation, and I do so extensively across the book's chapters. In very few words, the structural answer is this: AI is a project fundamentally opposed to the aims of education. It is incompatible with education – and not only because it is dominated by technofascists, or because it invites users, academics, students and researchers to outsource their thinking. The hard part of intellectual work is what makes that work valuable, and we are giving it away to machines. Anyone in academia with genuine curiosity about what lies behind these technologies tends to arrive at the same position I hold: in teaching, learning, and research, these technologies are to be avoided – for privacy reasons, for values, for ethical reasons, for intellectual reasons. Education is not a process that bends to our convenience. It is determined by our humanity. We are embodied beings; we have emotions; and the only way to develop our skills and produce new ideas is not to outsource the work to a machine. This is not a locomotive; this is not a car. To oversimplify: you do not become a marathon champion by taking your Volkswagen for a drive every day. That is not how it works!

Editing the Handbook: The value of disagreement

ST: Together with Jürgen, Fadhil and me, you have edited the *Handbook of Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education*, published by Edward Elgar (Popenici et al., 2026). This substantial volume, comprising 40 chapters, covers AI bias, disability inclusion, assessment, employability, and country-specific studies from Japan to Turkey to the UAE. Your solo book and the Handbook appear to represent two registers of the same conversation – one sharply critical, the other encyclopaedic and multivocal. How do the two books relate to each other, and what was it like editing a volume that inevitably includes perspectives you may not personally share?



Figure 6: Cover of Popenici et al. (2026).

SP: It was not an easy project: different time zones, agendas, academic schedules, priorities, and personal contexts that shape people's writing. The Handbook contains chapters I profoundly and wildly disagree with – and I am glad they are in it, because that, too, is part of the resistance. I cannot be consistent in arguing that the biggest problem of universities is their unilateral AI enthusiasm and then curate a unilateral AI critique. I value the conversation. We need all points of view – the enthusiasm and the critique – in an open exchange about everything that matters for education and AI. Universities do not offer that. The Handbook is a success precisely because it presents different perspectives from different parts of the world, different academic positions and different disciplines, and together they reveal a discursive landscape that is, in my opinion, skewed towards techno-optimism. We did something universities generally, religiously avoid: we included the critical points about AI.

This avoidance is the normalisation I keep describing, and it is not new. During the Second World War, universities were told it was normal to hate a certain group of people – that having Nazis in power was normal, and you had to agree. Those who disagreed were, quite literally, taken away. Under Stalin, critics of the regime were committed to psychiatric hospitals. That is how far it goes: for an ideology to crush reality, it must be made to look like normality – and whoever questions it becomes the abnormal one. That is what I most oppose in the current landscape of higher education: the technofascist, evangelical position under which any heretic who says ‘I do not think this can be used in education’ must be stoned – ‘fire this person, we cannot listen to this, this is insane’ – instead of being answered with arguments.

I would, however, push back gently on one word in your question. Nothing in my book is polemical, to my mind. Polemic is when you arrive without arguments. My arguments are based on solid research, facts, examples, and case studies of the environmental, social, and democratic damage caused by these technologies and by the group of technofascists working so hard to impose their lens on the rest of us.

JR: By ‘polemical’, we simply meant arguing very strongly for or against a specific position. It does not imply a lack of facts or evidence. I happen to like polemics.

SP: I know you do – that is why I am so at ease with the word between us. I simply see it from a different angle, and I had to clarify.

Alternatives ahead: Baldwin, booing graduates, and reasons for optimism

FT: You conclude your new book with a chapter titled ‘Alternatives ahead’. You describe a scene where a manager at your own university interrupted your presentation on AI risks by saying, in essence: ‘So what? AI is here to stay, and nothing will stop it’. You invoke James Baldwin’s warning that people who shut their eyes to reality invite their own destruction (Baldwin, 2021). But you do hold open the possibility of genuine alternatives. What are they? What would a university that took your arguments seriously actually look like in practice – and is there anywhere in the world where you see it beginning to happen?

SP: Unfortunately, I cannot be fixed to a single geographic location. I am European; I have also lived in North America, the Philippines, New Zealand, and now my home is Australia. I am structured to pay attention to what is happening around the world, so I cannot think in any register other than the international one. Now, to the core of your question: James Baldwin is one of my favourite authors, and his warnings about America were ignored – ignored by precisely the people who needed to heed them, and often hated for what he said. The same applies to the adoption of AI in higher education. There is a stubborn denialism about the identity crisis, the intellectual crisis, the learning crisis – all washed away in the new bureaucratic language of universities.

If you retain your capacity to be shocked, one source of shock is how disconnected universities are from real life. Every month, at least five excellent new critical books about AI appear, and universities ignore them completely – as if they never happened. The rest of the world takes note of them; academia does not. It is a psychotic enthusiasm for a marketing narrative. It is worse than mere subversion of the aims of education because it reveals a complete incapacity to recognise what universities are dealing with, and where students are left. Some academics are genuinely shocked that their students cannot read a full book (Horowitch, 2024). I use this example on purpose: these examples are coming from some of the best universities in the world – the Ivy League, not a marginal and poorly funded college. That is why the Baldwin quote is so relevant: they are preparing their own destruction. The performance is a very efficient way to mask corruption in all its forms – opportunism, and the intellectual emptiness of some people who claim to be academics and produce nothing new. I know of a published article, mediocre from start to finish, which proudly stated at the end that it was written by ChatGPT. I am not kidding; this is a real example. This leads to institutional implosion: people will ask, why should I care about institutions that do not care about me, or about their own names, values and students, and care only about serving politicians, filling their pockets and putting up new buildings?

Let me be clear: this is not indifference on my part. I strongly believe that we need universities for a livable future. Everything I say comes out of love for the idea of the university; I believe in it passionately. As for the alternatives, I will disappoint you slightly: I have to keep some of the solutions for the book's readers, so I will not reveal them. But I can end succinctly, because mine is, at heart, a book of optimism. When I wrote it, I could already see a sense of resistance developing – among students, colleagues, and personal connections. I see students saying: I realise I am losing the thing I love most, which is writing; I am not going to use this thing again, because it takes something from me that I cannot put back. And look at what has happened since in the United States: commencement speakers who thought it a good idea to praise AI have been publicly booed (Joffe-Block & Aslam, 2026). Graduates have had enough of the marketing – and of the lie – because they have their own brains and their own lives. They know their parents will live with the pollution and the noise of the data centres, which, of course, cannot be called surveillance centres, so we call them euphemistically. Our students are realising that all this does not serve them; it serves a problematic and frightening elite and the military-technological complex. That is why I am optimistic: it is realistic to think of alternatives, because our students are already asking for them. That is why they boo the people on stage, telling them, 'this is the future' (Harrison Dupré, 2026). It is not their future. It may be your future if you are a billionaire – but not theirs. The reaction to say "so what?" to the AI colonisation of education is equally realistic as saying that a poisoned drink must be avoided because it may kill you. Those who ignore the warnings inevitably discover what stands behind that "what".

JR: Ronny Chieng recently spoke at Harvard and told the graduating class: 'Fuck AI'. He received loud cheers.

SP: And not only that! Ronny Chieng – I love this man – went further, telling the graduates that if their generation has a mission, it is to destroy AI. Standing ovation. It is very telling, and it should not escape our attention, that a comedian is more realistic, talks more sense, and is more intellectually alert than our academics (Chieng, 2026). Where are we? What has happened to our institutions that we need a comedian to say what our students actually resonate with?

JR: I believe that, at present, it is often the comedians who tell more of the truth than anybody else.

'Habent sua fata libelli': Books, fate, and what comes next

JR: Finally: what is next for you? And is there anything you would like to say that we have not yet had the chance to ask you about?

SP: I will resist the temptation to dwell on the fact that even the Pope has warned the world that AI represents a threat to our humanity (Leo XIV, 2026). But I cannot stop thinking about what is next for me. It could be the fate of Saint Stephen, who was stoned for saying things that were unpopular in his time. Maybe that is my fate. I do not know.

JR: Stefan, I will never look at you the same way again.

SP: Yes – let us go to the stoning, as the immortal Monty Python put it in *Life of Brian*. Stefan is going to be 'terminated' – which, by the way, is the actual word universities use when they get rid of you. [All laughing]. But seriously: I studied in a Latin-language country, and I studied Latin as a child – because we had nothing better to do without AI. There is a saying: *Habent sua fata libelli* – books have their own fate. This is the greatest thing about books: they cannot be changed. No algorithm can quietly rewrite them or make them disappear, the way a website can be rewritten or deleted, as it happens now on a massive scale. Consider the lessons of the past, when the Nazis burned books – or the recent revelation, in US court proceedings, that millions of print books were cut apart and destroyed to feed AI training models (Edwards, 2025). Books have this rare quality: they survive. You never know when a book will fall into the right context – so let the book have its own fate. I did my part. I wrote what I believe is important, new, and necessary to say, and I cannot do much more now.

I hope the book will spark the important, intelligent conversation I keep calling for – like the debate I had with you today. These intellectual disagreements are what make us proper academics, and also human. GenAI is never going to disagree with you. That should be a warning to us.

GenAI is never going to disagree with you. That should be a warning to us.

As for next year: my most important plan is a new book, different again, because the context has changed once more. I have started working on a new book structured explicitly as an intellectual project of resistance to dehumanisation – to technological dehumanisation: a structured set of ideas that can help fight the current rise of fascism and the regression of our societies into darkness and ignorance, of the kind we now see frighteningly close to us. That is what I will do with my most important time.

FT: In one or two sentences: what is your resolution for higher education over the next ten years?

SP: To rethink the aims of education – including what our students desperately need and what our societies desperately need – together with a realistic evaluation of where the institution of higher education stands today, and where our societies stand today. On that basis, we can build a new project for higher education: one based on higher learning, not on spectacle.

***We can build a new project for higher education: one based on higher learning,
not on spectacle.***

JR: We thank you for this interview, Stefan.

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