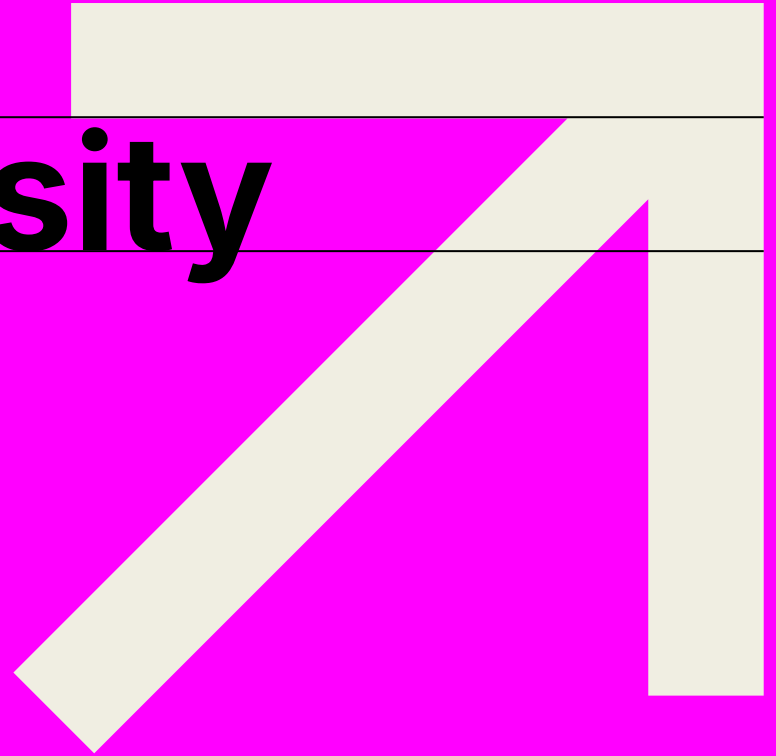


A Manual for **Human Curiosity** in the Age of Machine Intelligence



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We live in an age of infinite answers. Whatever you want to know, a machine will tell you in seconds — fluently, confidently, and without ever asking you to struggle for it. This is a remarkable gift. But when answers are this cheap, it becomes tempting to delegate not just our work but our wondering — the slow, uncertain, sometimes uncomfortable process of asking questions and chasing them down ourselves.

Yet entire fields of science and art exist only because someone followed a line of curiosity that wasn't obviously useful at the time.

Curiosity is not a passive trait you either have or don't. It's a muscle. It's fuel. Most of all, it's a form of agency: the difference between a life you actively author and one automatically curated for you.

This manual is a practical guide to keeping that muscle strong. It was created during at roundtable at SXSW London in June 2026 with 15 delegates, and maps how we are already handing our curiosity to machines, how to protect it, and where it's most worth pointing in the years ahead.

Before protecting curiosity, it helps to see clearly how AI is already reshaping it. Most of these patterns are useful. The risk lies in not noticing what they cost.

Outsourcing the personal. A strange inversion has taken hold: many of us reserve our sharpest thinking for clients and colleagues, while handing our own lives — relationships, self-understanding, what to do next — to a machine. We trust our brains for others but not for ourselves.

Thinking partner versus answer machine. At its best, AI is a partner: someone to think *with* when you feel alone, a way to launch the hard first step of a blank page. At its worst, it's an answer machine that we reach for the instant a question appears, bypassing the reflection that question was meant to provoke.

Administrative and creative outsourcing. Scheduling, travel, drafting, summarizing — AI absorbs them all in the name of saved time. But writing is not the transcription of finished thoughts; it *is* the thinking. Outsource the writing and you outsource part of the thought.

What it costs when we lose human curiosity

Traceability. When a machine helps you reach a conclusion, you often can't retrace the path that got you there. The conclusion may be sound, but the *journey* — the connections, the reasons — evaporates. Without the journey, the lesson never lands.

Memory. Memory and learning are bound up in creation. The generation effect shows that when you make your own version of something, it sticks; when you passively receive it, it slides off. Outsource the making and you skip the growth that only struggle provides.

Perspective. Personalization feels like expansion but often works as narrowing. Prediction is probability-based and homogenizing — the opposite of curiosity, which thrives on the random glance, the unexpected spark, the thing you weren't looking for. Lean entirely on the "For You" feed and you forget how to curate your own attention.

Taste and intuition. Knowing what feels right is a muscle built over years of doing hard things and paying attention. The danger is generational: a child who outsources creative effort from the start may never develop the framework needed to judge whether an answer is any good at all.

Boredom. Curiosity is the fuel that carries us out of boredom. Fill every one-minute gap — the supermarket queue, the elevator ride — with stimulation, and you close the very space where light-bulb moments live.

Sensory grounding. We learn by existing in the world, in bodies, through our senses. A machine has none of this. It cannot be inspired by a smell, a room, a chance encounter. Its philosophy is thin because its context is borrowed.

How to protect human curiosity

Protecting curiosity means resisting the reflex to delegate your wondering. None of what follows is anti-technology. It's about staying the agent in your own relationship with the tool.

- 1. Create friction.** Put a deliberate gap between having a question and reaching for an answer — long enough to hear yourself think first. Create physical friction too: step away from the computer, skip the spoken interface, make the easy reach slightly less easy. Don't rely on willpower; rely on design.
- 2. Make space for boredom.** Boredom is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be defended. It forces the mind to find its own way out, and that search is curiosity. Guard the empty minute. Let yourself — and especially children — be bored. Get comfortable sitting with "I don't know yet."
- 3. Trigger the generation effect.** Actively create your own version of things — write the caption, take the photo, make the argument, draft the plan. Creation converts experience into memory in a way consumption never will.
- 4. Develop your taste.** You can only judge an output once you've built the intuition to know what "good" feels like, and that comes from reading widely and doing the work yourself first. Earn your taste before you delegate to a tool that has none.
- 5. Practice meta-curiosity.** Be curious about the AI itself. How was it built? Where does its data come from? Whose choices are embedded in it? Who is affected by it? Staying curious about the system keeps you its user, not its subject.

The future of human curiosity

Forget for a moment what AI can or cannot do today. The deeper question is where curiosity will matter most as the machines improve. Here are some territories we think are worth (re)claiming:

The self and other people. The most complex subject in any life is the self, and no model understands your context the way you can. Stay curious about who you are — and just as urgently, about other people: their opinions, their backgrounds, the divides between us. Empathy, the capacity to feel everything around you, is among the most human things to protect.

The hard journey. Value process over output. The struggle of doing things manually is exactly where learning happens, and there's a cost in removing the mistakes you most need to make. Allow yourself to fail and stay curious about failure itself.

The systems themselves. Cultivate the habit of asking why rather than accepting an answer as final. Where did this information come from? How is this technology sustained, and at what cost? Where does your data go, and who benefits? Curiosity about the system is how you keep the tool working for you rather than the reverse.

Qualitative sensory context. The physical world holds infinite context that no dataset can capture. Stay curious about the things that only happen in bodies and rooms and chance: the spontaneous, unplanned moments that a curated, algorithm-shaped day would never produce.

Curation and craft. Rediscover how to find things outside the filter, such as the way you once flipped through a record store instead of accepting the same playlist as everyone else. And protect handiwork: the intersection of human and machine where the hand still matters and you still get to feel everything around you.

Contributors

This manual was co-created by a panel of contributors during a roundtable at SXSW London hosted by Dr Anne-Laure Le Cunff, founder of Ness Labs, author of Tiny Experiments, and neuroscientist at King's College London. Many thanks to:

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