I'm not a robot

If you have grown up with social media, chances are you have taken more photos in the last couple of decades than you will ever remember. When mobile phones suddenly became cameras too, social media turned into a community photo album, with memories kept online forever and ever. Or so we thought. In 2019, MySpace lost 12 years worth of music and photos, affecting over 14 million artists and 50 million tracks. If Instagram or the entire internet suddenly disappeared, would you be able to access your precious memories? We are living in a digital dark age, a term popularised by information and communication specialist Terry Kuny. Back in 1997, Kuny warned we were moving into an era where much of what we know today, much of what is coded and written electronically, will be lost forever. He argued that, like monks from the Middle Ages who preserved books (and therefore, knowledge), we must preserve digital objects of today. Otherwise, future generations will be left with gaps in knowledge about our present-day lives. This article is part of Quarter Life, a series about issues affecting those of us in our twenties and thirties. From the challenges of beginning a career and taking care of our mental health, to the excitement of starting a family, adopting a pet or just making friends as an adult. The articles in this series explore the questions and bring answers as we navigate this turbulent period of life. You may be interested in: Instapoetry is successful and theres nothing wrong with that TikToks pomegranate obsession: the trendy fruit was also big during the Renaissance to talk about female fertility Is someone using your pictures to catfish? Your rights when it comes to fake profiles and social media stalking People often say the internet is forever, but digital artefacts like photos and videos are actually unstable and non-permanent. Youve likely encountered linkrot, when a URL to an important source leads to a now-deleted webpage. Hardware becomes obsolete, degraded and upgraded over time. Bit-rot (also called data or file rot, or data degradation) means we may have no physical means to access our past data. Many people already find it hard to use technology and software that has reached its end of life. With the lack of backwards compatibility (when updated technology or software cannot support older versions), how will future generations access old data stored in obsolete formats? We are also seeing issues emerge related to ownership of data, particularly when controlled by private corporations. Families have faced legal difficulties accessing the social media accounts of deceased loved ones. Similarly, if Spotify or Netflix shut down tomorrow, you wouldnt own any of the songs or films you stream on a daily basis. A digital life For a number of reasons, you may not even notice that we are in the middle of a new digital dark age. From Google smart homes to contact-tracing technology, life is increasingly digital. Without an app, internet or social media account, it is difficult to verify your identity and gain access to data even your own. Many people dont even consider non-digital means of recording, proving and living their existence. With Instagram stories disappearing after 24 hours, and Snapchat and WhatsApps vanishing messages features, you are probably used to data disappearing instantly. With the growing need for environmental sustainability, turning to digital formats seems like the responsible solution to reducing our carbon footprint though have you thought about the e-waste you produce? Even with data protection laws now giving people the right to have personal data erased, many may not want their data to be preserved forever. Identity theft can occur with social media content that reveals biometric or other personal data. And thats not to mention cyberstalking, cyberbullying, the distribution of revenge porn and online grooming. But despite all these very understandable concerns, there are still good reasons to think seriously about how you preserve the digital artefacts and data that are most important to you. If Spotify crashed tomorrow, how would you listen to your favourite albums? Guillem de Balanzo/Shutterstock Protecting and preserving your old data If you misplaced your phone, could you remember important phone numbers, or navigate streets when lost? If the answer is no, you may want to think more carefully about data preservation. This is something we should all think about, and not just leave it to digital archivists and preservationists. When organised efforts are made to preserve data, who decides what should be preserved can become a political issue as much as a technological one. When it comes to your own digital memories, there are services you can use and steps you can take to preserve data from being lost to history: Keep multiple copies (and formats) of important data across different devices: SD cards, USB thumb drives, DVD/Blu-ray discs, external hard drives and NAS (network attached storage) boxes. This has to be coupled with ensuring you regularly migrate important data to the newest device or format (remember, avoid bit-rot).Try (re)discovering analogue trends board games alongside video games, vinyl records over streaming music, or celebrate the resurgence of Polaroid cameras. Many services are available to convert digital photos into printed photos, albums and physical artwork.Embrace the ethos of the FAIR principles) findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable so that you and others can locate and access any important data you wish to preserve easily.Finally, if you come across a rotten link or other missing data, you can explore data preservation initiatives like the Long Now Foundations publicly accessible Rosetta Project or the Internet Archive, a non-profit library of free digital books, movies, software, music and websites. Reddit and its partners use cookies and similar technologies to provide you with a better experience. By accepting all cookies, you agree to our use of cookies to deliver and maintain our services and site, improve the quality of Reddit, personalize Reddit content and advertising, and measure the effectiveness of advertising. By rejecting non-essential cookies, Reddit may still use certain cookies to ensure the proper functionality of our platform. For more information, please see our Cookie Notice and our Privacy Policy. In this so-called Age of Information, we find ourselves plunged into a paradoxical darknessa time when myth increasingly triumphs over truth, and justice is routinely deformed or deferred. At The Higher Education Inquirer, we call it the Digital Dark Ages.Despite the unprecedented access to data and connectivity, were witnessing a decay in critical thought, a rise in disinformation, and the erosion of institutions once thought to be champions of intellectual rigor. Higher education, far from being immune, is now entangled in this digital stormnone more so than in the rise of robocolleges and the assault on public universities themselves.The Fog of MythThe myths of the Digital Dark Ages come packaged as innovation and access. Online education is heralded as the great equalizera tool to democratize knowledge and reach underserved students. But as the dust settles, a darker truth emerges: many of these online programs are not centers of enlightenment, but factories of debt and disillusionment. Myth has become a business model.The fantasy of upward mobility through a flexible online degree masks a grim reality. The studentsoften working-class professionals juggling jobs and familiesbecome robostudents, herded through algorithmic coursework with minimal human interaction. The faculty, increasingly adjunct or contract-based, become roboworkers, ghosting in and out of online discussion boards, often managing hundreds of students with little support. And behind it all stands the robocollegea machine optimized not for education, but for profit.The Rise of RobocollegesThe rapid growth of online-only education has introduced a new breed of institutions: for-profit, non-profit, secular, and religious, all sharing a similar DNA. Among the most prominent are Southern New Hampshire University, Grand Canyon University, Liberty University Online, University of Maryland Global Campus, Purdue University Global, Walden University, Capella University, Colorado Tech, and the rebranded former for-profits now operating under public university names, like University of Phoenix and University of Arizona Global Campus.These robocolleges promise convenience and career readiness. In practice, they churn out thousands of credentials in fields like education, healthcare, business, and public administrationoften leaving behind hundreds of billions of dollars in student loan debt.The Robocollege Model is defined by:Automation Over EducationAggressive Marketing and RecruitmentHigh Tuition with Low ReturnShallow Curricula and Limited Academic SupportPoor Job Placement and Overburdened StudentsThese institutions optimize for profit and political protection, not pedagogy. Many align themselves with right-wing agendas, blending Christian nationalism with capitalist pragmatism, while marketing themselves as the moral antidote to woke education.Trumps War on Higher Ed and DEIFormer President Donald Trump didnt just attack political rivalshe waged an ideological war against higher education itself. Under his administration and continuing through his influence, the right has cast universities as hotbeds of liberal indoctrination, cultural decay, and bureaucratic excess. Public universities and their faculties have been relentlessly vilified as enemies of real America.Central to Trumps campaign was the targeting of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Executive orders banned federally funded diversity training, and right-wing media amplified the narrative that DEI was a form of reverse racism and leftist brainwashing. That playbook has since been adopted by Republican governors and legislatures across the country, leading to:Defunding DEI Offices: Entire departments dedicated to equity have been dismantled in states like Florida and Texas.Censorship of Curriculum: Academic freedom is under siege as laws restrict the teaching of race, gender, and American history.Chilling Effects on Faculty: Scholars of color, queer faculty, and those doing critical theory face retaliation, termination, or self-censorship.Hostile Campus Environments: Students in marginalized groups are increasingly isolated, unsupported, and surveilled.This culture war is not simply rhetoricalits institutional. It weakens public confidence in higher education, strips protections for vulnerable communities, and drives talent out of teaching and research. It also feeds directly into the robocollege model, which offers a sanitized, uncritical, and commodified version of education to replace the messy, vital work of civic learning and self-reflection.The Debt Trap and Student Loan ServitudeToday, more than 45 million Americans are trapped in a cycle of student loan debt servitude, collectively owing over $1.7 trillion. Robocolleges have played a central role in inflating this debt by promising career transformation and delivering questionable outcomes.Debt has become a silent form of social controldisabling an entire generations ability to invest, build, or dissent.Delayed Life MilestonesPsychological TollStalled Economic MobilityThis is not just a personal burdenit is the product of decades of deregulation, privatization, and a bipartisan consensus that treats education as a private good rather than a public right.The Dismantling of the U.S. Department of EducationOver time, and especially under Trump-aligned officials like Betsy DeVos, the U.S. Department of Education has been hollowed out, repurposed to protect predatory institutions rather than students. Key actions include:Rolling Back Protections for borrowers defrauded by for-profit colleges.Weakening Oversight of accreditation and accountability metrics.Empowering Loan Servicers to act with impunity.Undermining Public Education in favor of vouchers, charters, and online alternatives.The result? Robocolleges and their corporate allies are given free rein to exploit. Students are caught in the machinery. And the very institution charged with protecting educational integrity has been turned into a clearinghouse for deregulated profiteering.Reclaiming the Idea of Higher EducationThis is where we are: in a Digital Dark Age where myths drive markets, and education has become a shell of its democratic promise. But all is not lost.Resistance livesin underfunded community colleges, independent media, academic unions, student debt collectives, and grassroots movements that refuse to accept the commodification of learning.Whats needed now is not another tech solution or rebranding campaign. We need a recommitment to education as a public good. That means:Rebuilding and funding public universitiesProtecting academic freedom and DEI effortsCanceling student debt and regulating private actorsRestoring the Department of Education as a tool for justiceRethinking accreditation, equity, and access through a democratic lensBecause if we do not act nowif we do not call the Digital Dark Ages by namewe may soon forget what truth, justice, and education ever meant.If you value this kind of reporting, support independent voices like The Higher Education Inquirer. Share this piece with others fighting to reclaim truth, equity, and public education from the shadows. I saw an article last week that really piqued my interest where Googles Vint Serf talked about the potential for a Digital Dark Age in the future. The concept certainly grabbed my attention; Serfs basic point is that we have seen so much technology become obsolete throughout the last couple of years, that there may conceivably be a time where our digital technologies become obsolete too. Software such as the Microsoft Office package, Adobe PDFs, and even internet browsers themselves may one day become obsolete. When programmes that have been so embedded in our daily life for so long become obsolete and the technology no longer exists to view files created in Microsoft Word, or view family photos, how do we go about recovering and preserving these things? The obvious comparisons to make in regards to a Digital Dark Age is with the gaming industry. Games that we used to cherish in childhood on the old SNES or Sega Megadrive are today playable only by a few collectors with technical know-how who have managed to keep their machines functioning and game cartridges from corrupting. Nintendo is quite good at backwards compatibility with its highly successful DS console, but other entertainment companies see their past products as disposable and some genuinely historic moments in gaming are now all but forgotten. The same comparisons can be made with film (Betamax, VHS, Laser Disc players now all museum pieces and nothing else) and music (whilst vinyl is having a resurgence in some sectors, cassettes and mini discs are a distant memory.) If this Digital Dark Age does come to pass, and the personal computer as we know it and softwares associated with it become obsolete, what is the solution to loss of key historical and cultural moments, many of which now occur online? Archivists are key in many media industries (print and film being the two that spring to mind) and a standardised archive system for software and files, preserving them in a digital vellum as Serf calls it, is interesting in the way it wants to capture everything and store it on cloud-based servers. There may well be other solutions that arise as the term Digital Dark Age gains prominence. What do you think of the Digital Dark Age concept? Do you think digital archiving will become something we will all need to think about more? Let us know in the comments or drop us a tweet @digireccomp. The rapid advancement of technology has transformed nearly every aspect of our livesfrom how we work and communicate to how we learn, shop, and entertain ourselves. However, this digital revolution has also brought with it a darker undercurrent: ethical dilemmas that challenge traditional moral frameworks and demand new approaches to accountability and responsibility. As society becomes increasingly dependent on digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and data analytics, it is essential to examine the ethical questions these technologies raise. One of the most pressing ethical issues in the digital age is data privacy. Every click, search, and online purchase generates data. Tech giants like Google, Facebook, and Amazon have built entire empires on the collection and analysis of this information. Although data collection can be used to personalize experiences and improve services, it also opens the door to invasive surveillance practices. For example, targeted advertising based on browsing history can quickly veer into manipulative territory, influencing consumer behavior in ways that users may not even be aware of. Even more concerning is government surveillance. Programs like PRISM, revealed by Edward Snowden, demonstrated how governments can leverage technology to conduct mass surveillance, often without adequate oversight or public knowledge. AI technologies are increasingly used in decision-making processes across sectors including hiring, healthcare, law enforcement, and finance. While AI promises efficiency and objectivity, it often inherits the biases present in its training data. A biased algorithm can perpetuate discrimination rather than eliminate it. For instance, facial recognition software has been shown to have higher error rates for people with darker skin tones. Predictive policing algorithms have led to the over-policing of minority communities. These examples highlight the critical need for transparency, fairness, and accountability in AI development and deployment. Automation, powered by robotics and AI, is reshaping the job market. While it increases productivity and reduces operational costs, it also threatens to displace millions of workers. Ethical concerns arise when companies prioritize profit over people, replacing employees without adequate support for retraining or job placement. This dilemma poses questions about the social responsibility of tech companies. Should they be obligated to mitigate the negative effects of their innovations on employment? Who is accountable for the societal disruptions caused by automation? Another dark side of technology is its impact on mental health. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are designed to maximize user engagement, often by exploiting psychological vulnerabilities. Features such as infinite scroll, autoplay, and algorithmic recommendations encourage addictive behavior. This attention economy has serious implications. Studies have linked excessive screen time to anxiety, depression, and reduced attention spans, especially among children and teenagers. Ethical tech design should consider the mental well-being of users rather than merely optimizing for engagement metrics. Social media platforms have become fertile ground for the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories. Algorithms prioritize content that provokes strong emotional reactions, regardless of its accuracy. This has led to the creation of echo chambers where users are exposed only to information that aligns with their existing beliefs. Events like the spread of COVID-19 misinformation and the January 6 Capitol riots in the United States illustrate the real-world consequences of unchecked digital misinformation. Tech companies face ethical questions about content moderation, freedom of speech, and their responsibility to protect democratic processes. Deepfake technology allows for the creation of realistic but entirely fabricated audio and video content. While this has potential applications in entertainment and education, it also poses significant risks. Deepfakes can be used for blackmail, political manipulation, and the spread of disinformation. The erosion of trust in digital media could have severe implications for journalism, legal proceedings, and public discourse. Developing ethical frameworks for the creation and distribution of synthetic media is essential to counteract these dangers. The digital world often seems immaterial, but it has a substantial environmental footprint. Data centers that power cloud computing, AI models, and cryptocurrencies consume vast amounts of electricity and generate significant carbon emissions. Training a single AI model can emit as much carbon dioxide as five cars over their lifetimes. This raises ethical concerns about sustainability in the tech industry. As we move forward, balancing technological advancement with environmental responsibility becomes increasingly important. In the digital age, questions of intellectual property (IP) have become more complex. Open-source software fosters collaboration and innovation, but it also blurs the lines of ownership. Companies often profit from community-developed tools without giving due credit or compensation to original contributors. Moreover, AI models trained on publicly available contentsuch as artworks, writings, and musicmay reproduce or remix these materials without proper attribution. This raises ethical questions about originality, ownership, and the rights of creators. Access to technology is not evenly distributed. While some enjoy the benefits of high-speed internet, advanced education, and cutting-edge healthcare technologies, billions still lack basic digital access. This digital divide exacerbates existing socioeconomic inequalities. Ethical technology development should prioritize inclusivity and strive to bridge this gap. Efforts to bring affordable internet, digital literacy, and accessible tools to underserved regions are crucial for ensuring that the digital age benefits all of humanity. Technology, in itself, is neutralit is the intent and application that determine its moral standing. As we navigate the complexities of the digital age, ethical considerations must become central to the development and deployment of technology. This involves creating transparent systems, enforcing robust regulations, fostering diverse and inclusive tech teams, and prioritizing the well-being of users over profits. It also requires that consumers remain vigilant, informed, and vocal about the standards they expect from the companies that shape the digital world. The ethical dilemmas of our time are not easily resolved, but confronting them head-on is the only way to ensure that the future of tech is not just innovative, but just, inclusive, and humane.

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