

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Good morning. I increasingly feel that as a species we are living through a slow motion tragedy, and it is my greatest hope that with the work on The Great Simplification in this platform, we can help the viewers, engage with the ongoing. More than human predicament in ways that alter the default pathway.

[00:00:25] Not to preserve the world as we know it, but perhaps so a better one can emerge despite, the myriad challenges. That's gonna require knowledge and sense making and courage and categories of interventions. But before all that, it requires that we have agency at the level of the individual human. But I think preceding actual agency is the feeling that we have agency, which I think increasingly most of us don't, and this lack of agency and some suggestions on what to do about it in the face of the metabolic economic super organism was going to be this week's topic, because I've been thinking about it a lot.

[00:01:14] But then I thought about it more and there's a prequel that I think I need to highlight first. something I've been noticing in my own life. And given many of you are by definition watching this online and on YouTube, I guess that you have two, or at least in a rhyming sense.

[00:01:45] I now open my phone in the morning. Hopefully after my 12 minute elephant path, meditation that I'm supposed to be doing upon waking. and when I open my phone I find an endless stream of headlines and threads and clips and charts and hot takes and counter hot takes with confident explanations of what is happening today, why and the implications.

The Great Simplification

[00:02:18] And yet increasingly the feeling I have after swimming in some of this is actually a loss in orientation instead of the clarity or the dawning of insight that I was looking for. and I'm pretty worried about this. Yeah. There's always been more information than any one human. Can process and hold, but what's changing now and in my opinion, about to change massively, yes, because of AI and algorithms is the sheer speed and scale of information available to us.

[00:02:57] And dare I say, promoted to us we are in a period and about to enter a new period. I expect where for those with strong foundational knowledge and an understanding of how to use large language models will actually increase the true signal. The knowledge, the integration, the, making sense of things.

[00:03:19] But parallel to that, for the wide majority of regular people, the sheer increase in content, the noise is gonna far, outpace the increase in actual signal, a flood of content so large. It's going to make many people who are online and accessing media feel like they're drowning. And the new AI systems make it so extremely cheap to generate text and stories and narrative and coherent strings of words.

[00:04:01] and if you remember, I've said this a lot of times and it was in our book, for college students, the human mind can imagine millions of times more sentences and word combinations than can exist in the real world. And now AI is gonna undo that on steroids, pairing with, humans. They are gonna produce fast and confident summaries and.

[00:04:27] Honed arguments and explanations and answers at a scale that we've never seen before. All with a tone of competence and authority. And of course there's gonna be summaries of others' work and summaries of the summaries. And I imagine it won't be long, even with a small number of followers on this channel, there will be summaries of some of my monologues with AI graphics and other things posted by people.

The Great Simplification

[00:04:58] I have no idea. so the universe of potential knowledge, or things, you know. Claiming to be knowledge is about to explode and it really hasn't even started yet. shown in this graphic, each cube represents 3.2 million people, and the one red square is people coding or vibe coding. And the yellow cubes, are those paying \$20 a month for an advanced large language model?

[00:05:28] And the green are those using free chatbots. So this is very early days for the pipeline of ai, enabled. Content. These systems can write mesmerizing and witty paragraphs in two seconds, but this is a potentially very separate thing from writing that is thoughtful, helpful, or even accurate for navigating the world around us.

[00:05:59] So I think the sea change ahead is that the scarce resource is no longer going to be content or information. The scarce resource is gonna be authenticity, judgment, and the ability to discern what is grounded in truth. In reality. so taking a step back, it, it dawned on me this week that this tectonic shift.

[00:06:26] A pattern that we've seen before in the physical world with our food systems, and then subsequently our physical health and nutrition. We have completely re-engineered our food systems away from high quality soil and nutrient dense raw ingredients. synthetic fertilizers and food products engineered for shelf life and irresistible taste.

[00:06:52] I could go into a lot of detail about this, but the summary is there's no part of the food system left untouched. And just like AI is very costly from an energy standpoint, we use something like 12 to 14 calories of fossil fuels to deliver. One calorie of industrialized food to the dinner table. And this fossil fuel expansion of our food systems created real abundance when it came to global calories produced and how many people we can feed.

The Great Simplification

[00:07:26] But if we look at a layer underneath that, it created a bizarre result. The world currently has almost 3 billion people who are obese and almost 1 billion that are malnourished. And in many places, including my country, the USA, we have people who are both overfed and undernourished at the same time.

[00:07:47] About half of the households who struggle with malnourishment have at least one overweight or obese person. So it is completely possible to be swimming in calories and still be underfed on the vitamins and minerals and such that actually build a body. So due to fossil fuels, we have obesity and nutrient deficiency together.

[00:08:11] And that paradox showed up just like many other. Spend dollars of the economic Superorganism because our system optimized for what it could scale and monetize better yield convenience to people, profit margins, and the super normal palatability to our evolved taste buds. In fact, and I find this upsetting still, a large majority of modern food is not designed to nourish us at all.

[00:08:44] It's designed to be addictive, and I mean that in a literal sense, so it continues to sell at a profit. Check out my podcast episode now a couple years old with Robert Lustig, if you want to hear more about this. Okay, that's backdrop for my key point today. One of them, I think AI is about to run a parallel dynamic on our cognitive lives as fossil fuels did on our physical lives.

[00:09:14] AI industrializes information production the same way industrial agriculture, industrialized food. It makes it so cheap to produce something that feels like nourishment, that tastes like better understanding. and that also rewards our circuits that are craving. Certainty and novelty. Yes, cheap and abundant, about to come in spades, but the important.

[00:09:53] And expensive parts do not automatically come along for the ride. The expensive parts are things like measurement and sourcing, and expertise and

The Great Simplification

accountability and these expensive parts, are the things that tether words to our world to reality. so continuing a trend that started with the internet and was boosted with social media, we now risk becoming information rich and wisdom poor on steroids with AI and large language models.

[00:10:35] We risk becoming mentally full with so much noise, but still feeling and actually. Are undernourished for lack of real signal from all the information. We might actually call it ultra processed information. And I think that phrase matters because it points at the underlying incentives. A lot of what will flood our inboxes will be engineered.

[00:11:06] For engagement and virality, not for truth or for better orientation. It's gonna be built to be clickable and shareable and emotionally activating, and unfortunately, it's also likely to often be very coherent and persuasive. Taking it one step further, just like the biggest food manufacturers found something called the Bliss Point.

[00:11:32] The attention economy is gonna run on the same optimization. so food is, optimized with the just right ratios of salt, sugar, and fat. It's very plausible. A lot of AI content is gonna be optimized for the perfect blend of novelty, polarization, righteousness, to keep us engaged and coming back for more.

[00:11:58] all the feed algorithms and headline formats and the cadence of notifications has somewhere embedded in its supply chain, its own bliss point team. So the coming deluge of content is not going to be accidentally addictive, that it actually is the product. And I wanna say one more, uncomfortable thing.

[00:12:27] A, a plethora of uncomfortable things in the physical world. Fossil energy gave us armies of machine labor at immense scale. And that helped make our lives easier in many ways. And it also helped create conditions where our bodies could gradually drift towards being overfed and undernourished. And that

The Great Simplification

was on top of freeing us from much of the physical labor that kept us naturally active for thousands of years, leading us to the sedentary lifestyles.

[00:13:00] Many of us lead today. So that dynamic compounded the damage of calorie rich nutrient poor food. But now we are building armies of digital cognitive laborers, and they're gonna make things easier too. But also introduce a, rhyming vulnerability to the sedentary mind. So when AI armies handle the research and the synthesis and the writing of content.

[00:13:32] The cognitive muscles that used to be required, for the effort and synthesis and, all the things begin to atrophy. And I, Zach Stein and Nora Bateson talked about this in their recent reality roundtable. So I think this combined with being overfed ultrapro information makes it easier for our minds to become disoriented, and perhaps so disoriented, we might feel.

[00:14:02] Lost. Same meta pattern from the economic Superorganism, but now a different substrate. not machines powered by fossil fuels, but machines for our minds powered by fossil fuels and everything else. Some of you might be drawing a parallel thread here to the recent rise of weight loss drug, GLP one and all its brand names in the physical world.

[00:14:32] When our obesity crisis became undeniable, we didn't fix the food system. We overwrote it with a pharmaceutical appetite suppressant at scale with enormous profit, arguably involving some of the same entities who had a hand in. Creating the broader chronic health crisis. They didn't fix the problem, they managed the symptoms.

[00:14:55] So what might the cognitive GLP one be? Well, if we follow the logic of our physical system, it's likely gonna come from AI itself, likely sold by the same company that created the problem.

The Great Simplification

[00:15:12] I think the question becomes, do we want to wait for the cognitive GLP one equivalent? Or should we be building the discipline now, as individuals, as a culture while, we're still able to, so this was all a preamble to, my original planned, frankly, on agency. what do we do with this? What practically as people trying to say, sane in this rapidly changing world that, Most of us didn't sign up for, none of us can fact check the entire internet and none of us are gonna keep up with the volume of information, let alone fact checking it that's coming. So, I humbly suggest we need some sort of a first pass discipline, something we can run quickly in real time, before we let.

[00:16:09] A piece of content in the morning reshape our worldview or our nervous system. and there's a step before the filters, and it's simpler than it sounds. Do I want to enter this current at all today? Do I actually need to swim in this right now? because I think one of the most underrated skills in the coming years is gonna be the ability to say no, to step onto the bank for a while and not swim.

[00:16:43] and this is all about protecting your attention, and we're gonna need cognitive discipline as well as caloric discipline. Next week I'm gonna talk about agency, and this is part of what I mean by that. But if you do choose to swim, and most of us do, because we're part of society, we wanna know what's going on and be in the flow of, information in our rapidly changing world.

[00:17:12] Here are three questions that have been helping me lately. Is it true? Is it relevant? Is it useful? The first one is about contact with reality in an AI world. We will get plausibility, polish, and confidence on demand. But what stays expensive is, as I said before, the accuracy, the nuance, the, tether to reality.

[00:17:41] So when I see a claim that activates me, especially when it makes me feel righteous, or afraid, or. More certain than I already was. I try to slow down just enough so I can say, can I trace this back to something real? Is there a primary

The Great Simplification

source here that's somewhat legitimate? Is there data? And is there an institution or person with an actual reputation that has helped or hurt by this information?

[00:18:13] And if I can't answer it or trace it quickly, I don't necessarily reject the information. I just put a big old handicap on it by treating it as unverified information, so I don't pass it on or build on it. The second filter for this deluge of information is relevance. Even a true statement could be noise for you or for the world and in a media environment where the volume is gonna explode.

[00:18:44] As my friends Aza Raskin and Tristan Harris have long said, attention will increasingly be the scarce resource. And if you spend your attention on things that don't change your decisions or your priorities or your understanding of what's going on in the world, you can end up both informed and less effective at the same time.

[00:19:07] So relevance means, does this deepen your real understanding or change the picture of what is actually shaping your life, your community, and for viewers of this channel, of the living world, and the biosphere. Does it change what you think? Is it likely, does it change what you think you should do next?

[00:19:33] If it doesn't, it might still be interesting or entertaining, but those are different things than nourishment. And at the crest of the carbon pulse, I think time is one of our most critical and depleting assets. So this is a question we're gonna have to ask ourselves when we're flooded with all this stuff.

[00:19:54] And that leads me to the third filter, which is usefulness. And I mean that in the sense of orientation to the unfolding more than human predicament. Useful information improves judgment. It helps us see trade-offs and questions more clearly, and it might help us act with a little more wisdom under the constraints we're in increasingly gonna face.

The Great Simplification

[00:20:26] Sometimes usefulness is, very tiny and very local. It could mean just a stop in amplifying anger or polarization, or maybe taking a step closer to improving your. Relationships or your household resilience or your local place and a piece of content on the internet can be both true and relevant, but still fail.

[00:20:53] This third filter if it primarily agitates you or polarizes you or trains you to perform and express certainty. Without actually making you more capable, on the things that matter. So these are just things I'm, trying to be aware of as I stare at what I think is coming and I'm really starting to fear for our epistemic comments, what we share.

[00:21:28] That we think is true so that we can have collective conversations. And I think these three simple filters are about how to achieve the mental equivalent of nourishment in an information environment that is going to be increasingly engineered for virality and attention. But the scale of it is about to explode.

[00:21:49] So going back to the food systems analogy, in an environment full of ultra processed options. Some dietary discipline becomes necessary if you want to become healthy. I say this as someone who is personally navigating a restricted diet right now, and those impulses are hard to overcome and the parallel is not lost on me with the cognitive laborers, that are about to be cheap, abundant, and everywhere.

[00:22:17] But similarly, actually, extremely similarly, in an information environment full of Ultrapro content, some cognitive discipline is gonna become necessary if we want to stay oriented and sane. I'm gonna get to agency and the Metris next week, but with respect to AI in the coming. Dwarfing of signal by noise.

[00:22:43] I think personal practices still matter, and maybe they become paramount because each of us chooses what we ingest in this growing ocean of information, and each of us chooses what we pass along to other people. And

The Great Simplification

then those choices compound in our culture via conversations and such. In a world where words are about to become incredibly cheap, our careful attention may just become an expression of our ethics.

[00:23:20] Next week, tentatively titled, desperately Seeking Agency. Talk to you soon. Hope you all are well.