

# AI Can Produce Research. Who Will Produce Researchers?

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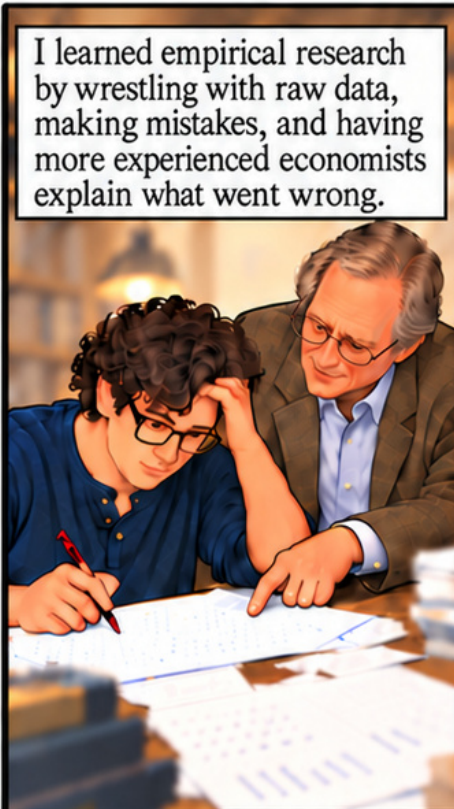
I'm helping destroy the ladder I once climbed.



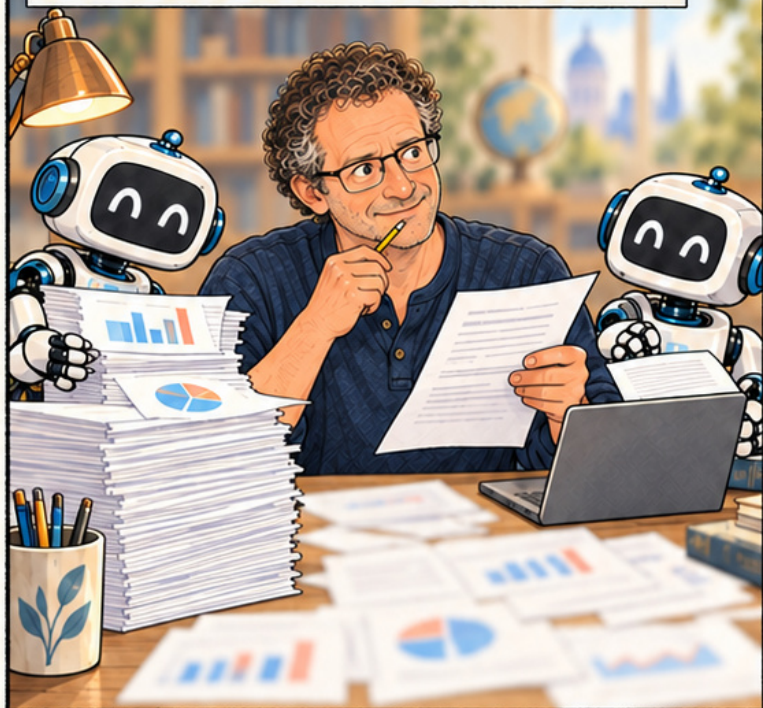
I learned empirical research by wrestling with raw data, making mistakes, and having more experienced economists explain what went wrong.



Later, I hired research assistants who learned the same way.



This fall my newest assistants helped me finish a hundred-page study of rural broadband subsidies in two weeks.



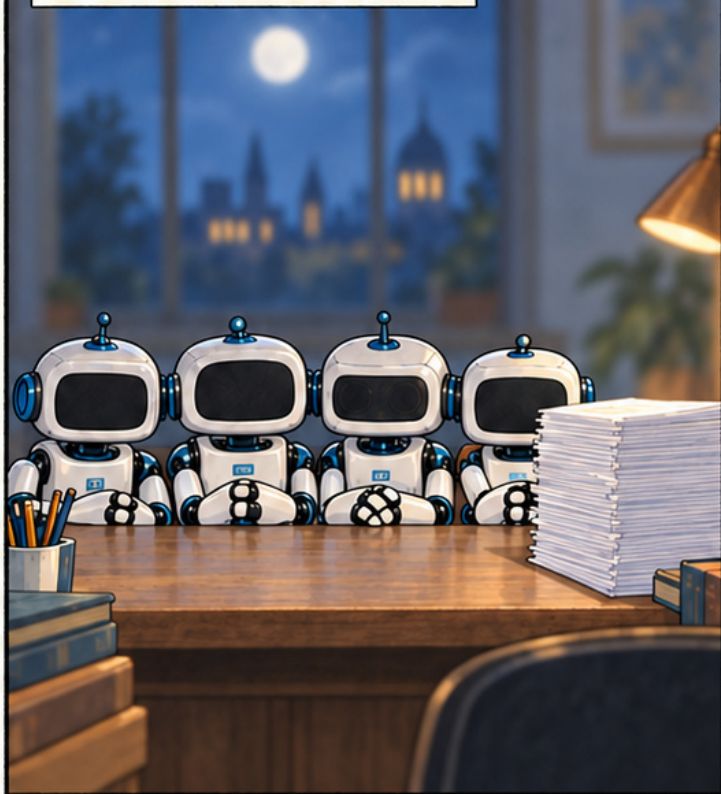
A second set independently re-estimated the results to check them.



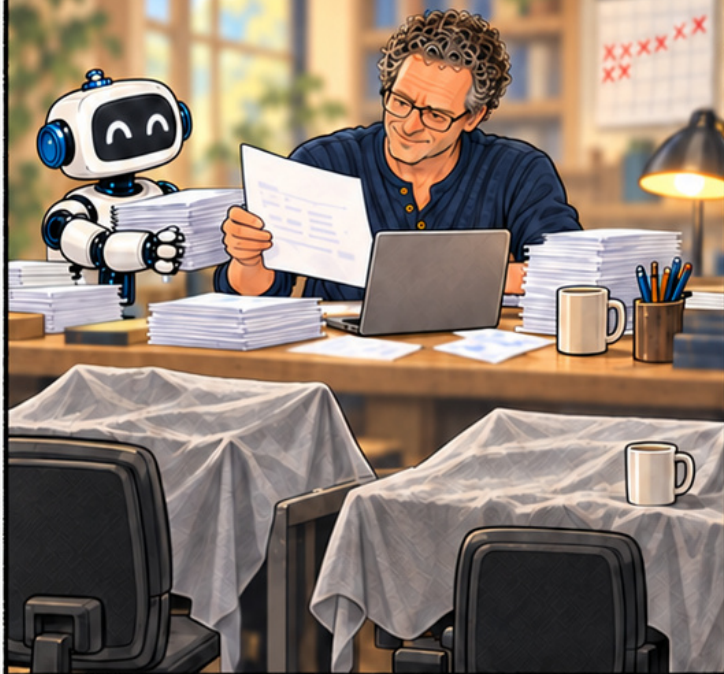
They cost me a few hundred dollars.



They will never get Ph.D.s.



AI made the research cheaper. On this project, it made the training disappear.



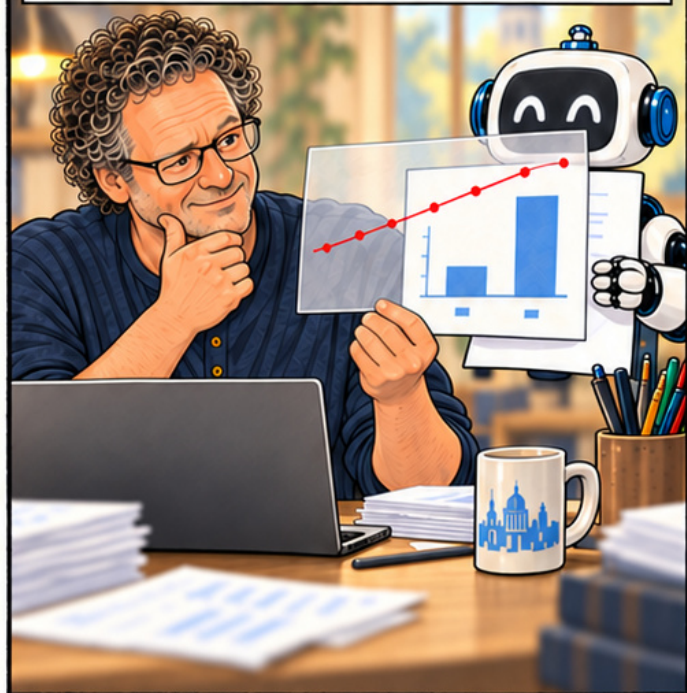
The risk extends to any field where beginners learn by doing work AI can now do.



A subscription gets you access to the models, but not the years of experience it takes to direct them well.



Governments use research to decide whether programs such as broadband subsidies work. An estimate alone doesn't do that. Someone has to notice when a convincing number comes from comparing the wrong things.



AI makes producing an answer cheaper, so we're going to get more of them. Two finance professors recently generated 380 manuscripts in about 12 hours.



A colleague and I asked a postdoc fresh out of graduate school to update a paper we had coauthored in 2010.

Good for the field.  
Good for your CV.



A few weeks later, stuck on the floor of a crowded Denver terminal waiting for a delayed flight, I had an AI model redo the whole paper. It took about 30 minutes.



Without AI, I worried, we were entering the postdoc in a stock-car race with a horse and buggy.



# A better apprenticeship

My coauthor knew better. He asked the postdoc to check the AI's work.



A second model could probably have done some of that. By doing it himself he came to understand the data better than either of us.



At our next meeting, the postdoc brought a dozen charts. We spent the hour deciding together which four the paper needed.

We need to cut this to four. Which ones?



He brought the analysis. We brought years of watching the industry. Neither senior person had touched the project since the previous meeting. Our hour was the apprenticeship.

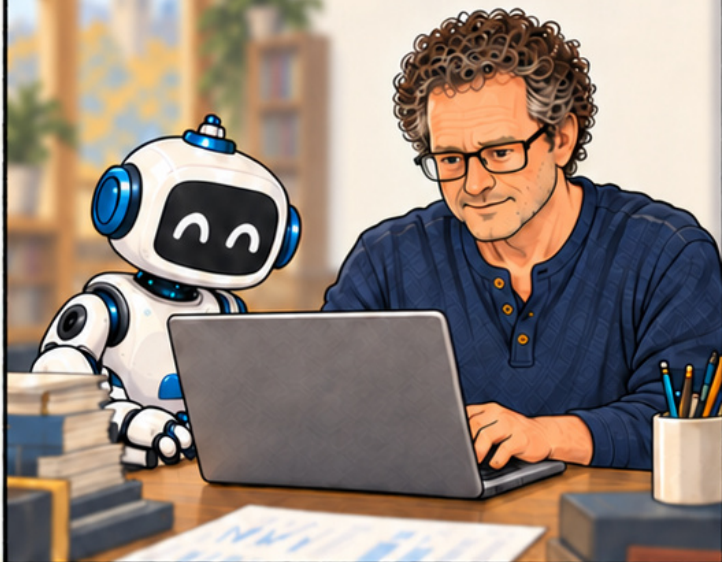
That dip. Was that when the auction authority lapsed?



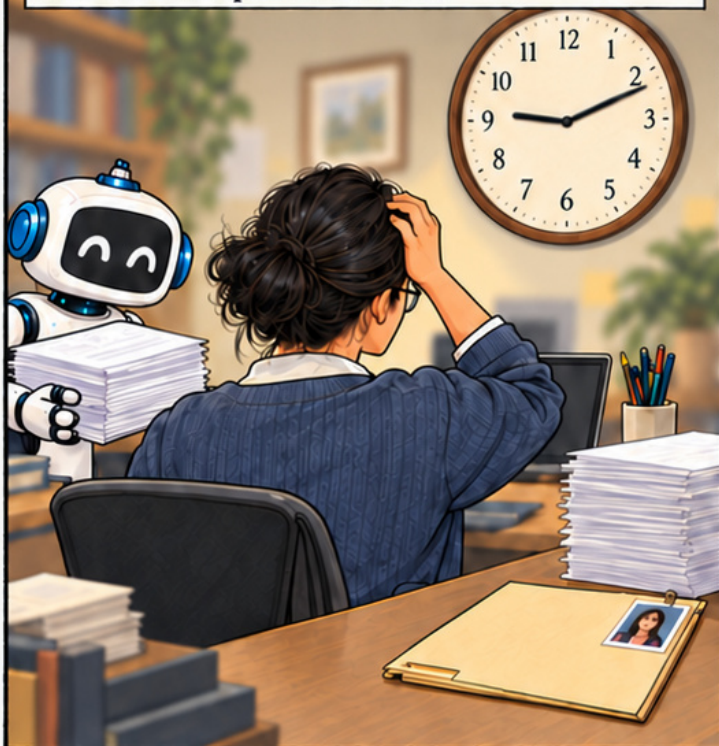
The old arrangement gave senior researchers a practical reason to teach. When an assistant made a mistake, I explained it partly so they would learn and partly because I needed better work next time.



When a model makes a mistake, I just fix the prompt.



A junior professor facing a tenure clock has a powerful incentive to skip the human and choose the route that publishes faster.



Even if someone else pays a student's salary, training requires my time. The catch is that my first instinct in Denver is the one the new incentives reward.



Experienced researchers' time is now the scarce input, and the people who learned the old way will not be around forever.



The administration's proposal to eliminate the National Science Foundation's social science directorate cuts the money that pays many research assistants, and the program that studies the scientific workforce itself.



I have no desire to return to the yearlong project. I want the faster analysis, the inexpensive checks, and the ability to pursue questions I could not afford before.



My AI assistants may never become my colleagues. Someone still has to train the people who will.



A note on how this was made. The words are mine. They come from an op-ed I wrote, lightly cut to fit narration boxes. The pictures are not mine. I cannot draw. Barely even stick figures. I worked with Claude to turn the essay into a panel-by-panel script and a set of image prompts, going back and forth over several drafts on what each panel should show, what to cut, and what was confusing or wrong. ChatGPT then generated the pages and images from those prompts. The ideas, the argument, and the editorial choices are mine.

Readers will notice that this is a small instance of the problem the essay describes and of an earlier piece I wrote on a similar theme. A project that once would have required a human illustrator took a few hours and a few prompts. I would never have hired an illustrator for this, so no one lost work. It simply would not have existed. (Whether it should exist is a separate question.) That the work is new, not displaced, is the part of the story that is easy to leave out, and it seemed better to say so than to leave it unmentioned.

I should also mention that [a post I published last week](#) included a few cartoons without saying that AI drew them. The idea that I could have drawn them was so preposterous that it never occurred to me the disclosure would matter. But it does matter. Disclosure norms will evolve, but for now I would rather err toward too much than too little, and I have added a note to that post.

