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THEMED ESSAYS

"The Wizard" of AI*

Melissa Vogel

Abstract

When the history of the United States in 2025 is written, it is likely to go down as the year when the hype around AI reached a fever pitch and the beginning of a fundamental shift in how businesses approach task assignment and staffing. Many CEOs are spending millions of dollars investing in AI tools while enacting mass layoffs under the impression that thousands of humans are no longer needed as AI will fulfill many roles faster and more efficiently. In the tech industry, I have observed that the remaining employees tend to express an almost rabid enthusiasm for rapid AI adoption as their path to promotion. Or, they are careful to conceal their concerns behind a veneer of support for fear of being perceived as an obstacle to a profitable future. How do anthropologists in business break through the façade to educate others on the limits of AI's capabilities and the risks, ethical concerns, and appropriate use cases, while still keeping their jobs? Or should they bother? After all, in the US, we are reaching a critical inflection point for anthropology as a discipline, as it is targeted by the current administration for its support of diversity and equality. This essay explores the dilemma facing anthropologists across industries as their employers forge ahead with AI adoption, often without careful consideration of the pros and cons. I offer strategies for navigating the complexities of AI hype while doing in-house evaluation of these tools based on my experience working in the tech industry.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence, UX Research, Tech industry, Ethics.

* No AI tools were used to draft this essay. All errors or imperfections are my own.

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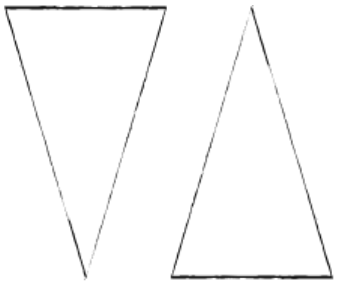

The tension in the Zoom room was evident on people's faces. Thank goodness we were not all in an actual conference room together. My team and I had high-priority research findings to deliver, and we knew the Senior Vice President awaiting our presentation would consider them bad news. We had been tasked with investigating the lack of adoption of a new artificial intelligence (AI) coding assist tool by our software engineers. This tool had been selected by the Chief Technical Officer several months before and surely cost the company multiple millions of dollars. He had been surprised to learn that less than half of our approximately 13,000 engineers had tried the tool, and only a small fraction of them were using it somewhat regularly. In our research, we found a number of issues: a lack of clarity around expectations for adoption, a lengthy process to gain access, inadequate training on the tool, and a confusing communication strategy for change management. But by far the most critical finding was that only the most junior engineers found the tool useful. More experienced engineers felt the level of coding produced by the tool was similar to that of an intern and, frankly, a waste of their time. All of these factors added up to the unsurprising conclusion that the tool was not being used. So, how do you communicate that to a senior executive and the C-suite without suffering negative consequences for being the messengers? The short answer is: very carefully. I was starting to feel like the corporate obsession

with AI was akin to the worshipful awe shown by the citizens of Oz to their wizard. If so, were my researchers and I to be seen as Glinda the Good, Dorothy the outsider, or, worse, the Wicked Witch of the West?

What follows is not an argument against AI, but against the undiscerning adoption of AI tools and against research-evaluation theater. My thesis is that anthropologists and social scientists can preserve integrity and influence – without self-sabotage – by pairing critical evaluation with solution-oriented delivery and skillful, politically savvy communication. I first diagnose how organizational incentives bias AI assessment and the pressures facing in-house researchers in this environment. Then, I outline potential strategies for overcoming those obstacles and keeping a seat at the table in the decision-making process of which AI tools to adopt and how to integrate them into the work processes (Artz 2025).

Organizations and AI Hype

Unlike the reporting of research findings in academic or purely scientific environments, researchers employed by corporations may find themselves in tricky political or ethical situations all too often (Chapman 2001: 31; Kitner 2014: 313; Malefyt and Morais 2012:129; Malefyt and Morais 2017: 112; Mascarenhas-Keyes 2001: 215-16; Valenzuela 2025). This is perhaps even more the case when the research in question is around the evaluation of AI tools and models, because the disruption from these tools exceeds that of previous platform changes (such as adding mobile capabilities or moving to the cloud) in terms of negative returns on investment, reductions in force, and erosion of consumer trust (for instance, Dooley 2025; Kelly 2025; O'Connor et al. 2025; Robinson 2026; Wile and Perlo 2025). In 2025, the CEOs of thousands of companies across industries were seemingly bewitched by the exponential increase in hype around anything related to AI. Many of them have already invested enormous sums to acquire these tools and make them available across their enterprises (for instance, Kariuki 2025; McCann 2024), often with what appears to be little vetting before purchase. Subsequently, in-house research teams have been engaged to evaluate these tools and their usage, sometimes as a pilot, but other times after the tool has already been purchased. The expectation for outcomes is often clear – tell us how much these tools are improving quality, reducing time on tasks, or making employees more pro-

ductive and efficient. The pressure to produce research findings that support these expectations, rather than challenge them, is real.

During the entire three weeks that my team was conducting this quick turnaround research, members of the leadership team were closely scrutinizing our work and quick to point out any perceived flaw in the process, even as they pressed us to find positive outcomes. This pattern repeated itself across our other AI evaluation projects – whether we were assessing AI meeting transcriptions, Google Gemini applications, or internally developed AI tools. While these projects drew less direct C-suite attention, our internal partners still expected us to validate their investments with favorable findings. In all cases, our results found that while some aspects of the tools might be useful, in general their creators had overpromised and underdelivered on their capabilities (see also Dell'Acqua et al. 2023; Estrada 2025). We were encouraged to find as many positive things to say as possible and given not-so-subtle insinuations to downplay negative results. While I am proud to say that, in all cases, my team protected the integrity of the data, we did massage the language of our reports for the teams sponsoring the research. In all cases, the tools were indeed implemented (if they had not already been), and it was unclear whether our recommendations for improvements or cautions were acted upon or conveyed up the chain of command. The confirmation bias appeared insurmountable, and our research felt rather pointless.

Some of these pressures are nearly always there for researchers in business, whether we are in-house or external, as we desire to keep the people paying our salaries happy with our performance. But in this new era of AI hype, the fear of negative repercussions on research teams and on research as a practice in these companies is well-founded. Across the tech industry, teams in design, market research, marketing, and even engineering have been dramatically reduced in size (for instance, Fonrouge, Palmer, and Holland 2025; Korst, Puntoni, and Toubia 2025; Wile and Perlo 2025), at least in part due to the assumption that, with AI, anyone can do those jobs regardless of their training. While discussions of the quality and accuracy of AI-assisted research are robust and frequent within the research community, they seem to be absent or quite unpopular within corporations. The prevailing sentiment could be characterized as "you're either pro-AI or against-AI," and there is clearly only one acceptable stance. Approaching the topic critically, as social scientists in industry are trained to do, automatically puts one in the against-

AI category and, in some cases, may jeopardize one's career prospects. It has become necessary to at least embrace the appearance of enthusiasm around AI adoption, while clandestinely resisting the hype and maintaining a cautious approach as we test and experiment.

More recent reports suggest that, slowly, some executives are starting to see behind the wizard's curtain to the AI machine behind the mask (for instance, Artz and Ren 2025; Li, Zhu, and Hua 2025; Niederhoffer et al. 2025; Wheeler 2025). As AI technology changes daily and adoption increases exponentially, leaders have been making fear-driven decisions. But it is essential that they move beyond naïve assumptions about current generative and predictive systems to understand the capabilities, flaws, limitations, and appropriate use cases for each tool or model. The current tools available may offer useful automations, summaries, or analyses and can streamline workflows, but they operate through pattern recognition and statistical prediction, not human judgment. Thus, they lack the contextual understanding and ethical reasoning that human workers bring, and they certainly are not sentient. In the specific case of large language models (LLMs), hopefully, more people are now aware of the inherent biases that occur when they have been trained on open-source data (Crawford 2016; Malefyt 2024: 160), and the hallucinations and inaccuracies they can generate (Bender et al. 2021; Thornhill 2025). In addition, the widespread adoption of AI involves serious costs, not just in terms of capital, but sometimes in decreased quality of outputs, unauthorized use of intellectual property, shrinking availability of human jobs, and overuse of non-renewable resources like water and power (Carbonaro 2025; Crawford 2021: 53-88; Reisner 2025; Ren and Wierman 2025).

Navigating through the Hype

Where does this leave anthropologists and other social scientists in industry? Are we to be typecast as "Dorothys" who unmask the Wizard of AI and, thereby, bear the wrath of those in power? Should we fearlessly point fingers like Elphaba or cave to political pressure like Glinda? How are anthropologists and other social scientists in industry to do their jobs well and with integrity, yet keep their positions? First and foremost, if social scientists are to continue to be part of the conversation, we must be perceived as creating solutions, not just as the bearers of bad news. In the case described above, we

offered actionable recommendations for clearer communication around expectations, streamlining of the entitlement process (which is how someone gets access to software), and a reduction in the number of approvals necessary for access to the coding assist tool, as well as improved training to fully exploit its capabilities. In other cases, we provided quantitative data on both perceived (self-reported) and actual time savings (tagged and tracked on the back end of the tool) to show any discrepancies. In the case of an AI notetaker, we observed that meeting participants found inaccuracies in the meeting summary that required a human to correct, essentially negating any time savings and adding the risk that, if no one reviewed the AI output, the wrong individuals could be held accountable for tasks assigned.

In general, we always tried to show both the pros and cons of each tool and use neutral language to describe the findings, even if we held stronger opinions based on the research. This does not mean distorting the data, but simply softening its presentation. As anthropologists, we are adept at reading the room, learning the lingo, balancing both insider and outsider perspectives, and adapting to the local culture, all skills which are essential for success in business and applicable in these scenarios (for instance, Artz 2023; Powell 2021, 2024). These skills are especially useful for navigating the political climate in a workplace. To the extent possible, we can also seek out more open-minded executives who value research rigor and can influence their less impartial peers. And we can continually educate ourselves on the latest advances in technology, making sure that we know where AI tools have improved and where new issues have been exposed.

However, despite all these strategies, we may still encounter circumstances where we must make hard decisions about how much to compromise or modify our language in order to protect our livelihood. These are conundrums that employees may confront in any role or profession. For example, I draw the line at being asked to falsify data or suppress findings – which thankfully I have not been asked to do – and I believe that I would speak up even if it risked my job (see also Jordan 2012: 21). However, there can be a wide gray area of how much to downplay negative results or broadcast positive ones, and I admit that life circumstances can have an impact on these decisions, especially once one has a mortgage or children to support. These types of ethical decisions must be made individually on a case-by-case basis, and sometimes you may be more of a Glinda than a Dorothy. My advice would

be to confer only with people you trust, because open discussions of these issues can make you a target in the current environment of constant layoffs. But I believe that, in the long run, our expertise is needed if companies are to invest wisely in the right AI tools appropriately matched to the problems they are intended to solve.

CONCLUSION

As the hype continues to reach a fever pitch and the technology bounces between delight and disappointment, we are reaching a turning point around AI for anthropology, business, and, indeed, humanity as a whole. Why should businesses adopt AI uncritically, when we have the skills and expertise to evaluate it, weigh the pros and cons, and determine the appropriate use cases? As critical thinkers who bring a holistic approach, global mindset, training in research ethics, and an awareness of the importance of diverse perspectives to developing AI tools, anthropologists are arguably even better prepared to support such efforts than some of our fellow social scientists. We are not just user-centered in our orientation, but also attentive to the diachronic dynamics of cultural diversity across humanity – a perspective beneficial to companies aiming for global impact. I suppose that it may take a catastrophic failure at a major company for the sloppiness to abate. However, smart companies will do the research upfront, listen carefully to the results, and avoid major mistakes on the road to sustainable success. Researchers must continue to exercise their agency and adeptly wield their influence as best they can. We have the opportunity to guide decision makers to make sound financial decisions and help train workers to work with AI tools, rather than be replaced by them. And we can educate the public so they do not fall into the same traps as the wonderstruck citizens of Oz. Anthropologists can play a significant role in achieving a successful outcome, given the opportunity.

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Melissa Vogel is a business anthropologist with over two decades of experience in research across North and South America and is now CEO of Great Heron Insights. She has led teams at Fortune 100 companies and market research firms and is a Professor Emerita at Clemson University, where she created the Business Anthropology program. She has authored two books and numerous articles and now publishes a video series called the *Anthro Minute* to educate the public about the value of anthropology.

Melissa Vogel can be reached at mvogel1@gmail.com