

## Global Essay Competition 2026

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**Title:** The Invisible Reshaping: AI, Cognitive Freedom, and the Generation No One Is Protecting

**Essay:**

### **Introduction**

The human mind is the most critical capacity in our history. It drives all innovation, enables complex social structures, and defines our unique identity. In other words, independent thought is the fundamental basis of how society functions.

However, with the rapid development of technology, we face a shift more unpredictable than the rise of the internet: AI has the potential to reshape human thought itself. This exacerbates a dangerous pattern: technological change accelerates while institutional response lags (Procter, 2025). AI capabilities evolve daily while regulatory frameworks take years to pass. This speed asymmetry creates a vacuum that invites epistemic capture and unforeseen societal risks.

We have seen this pattern before. Social media delivered a connection with addiction, polarization, and a mental health crisis among youth that no one predicted because no one chose to look at the beginning. By the time the damage became undeniable, a generation had already been shaped. AI represents the next chapter, but with higher risks. Social media reshaped how we consume information and communicate, but AI is reshaping how we think: how we reason, create, make decisions, and understand ourselves.

Even though there are high risks, this essay argues that the multipolar world order creates opportunities to build differently. While around 90% of Western students use AI for homework and creative work (Freeman, 2025), while Silicon Valley races to make AI assistance ubiquitous, a different path remains open through coordinated global action. The challenge is not technological, it is institutional. And the solution is not to slow innovation, but to redesign the incentives that drive it.

This essay proposes Cognitive Sanctuary Networks, protected digital ecosystems designed to cultivate cognitive independence during the critical developmental period, which are funded through Cognitive Impact Tax that transforms tech companies from obstacles to partners. The race is not to adopt AI fastest, but to adopt it wisest. And the winners will be those whose young populations retain the capacity for independent thought.

### **The Warm Water: Why We Cannot Feel the Change**

The genius of modern AI systems is that their influence feels like service. Recommendation algorithms quietly narrow information horizons by serving content aligned with demonstrated preferences (Chen et al., 2025). Generative AI suggests, assists, and refines until the boundary between human thought and machine suggestion dissolves (Kim & Fang, 2025).

In academia, nearly 90% of Western students now leverage GenAI for their work and life (Freeman, 2025); by 2024, companionship and therapeutic interaction emerged as a leading use case (Zao-Sanders, 2025). This immersion is compounded by the pre-existing digital habits of the youth, who already spend nearly five hours daily in algorithmically mediated social environments (DeAngelis, 2024). Consequently, these developing minds are not merely using technology; they are forming their foundational cognitive patterns within AI-optimized ecosystems, signalling a profound shift in human agency.

This is a dangerous sign. AI algorithms are deciding what and how we see the world. Generative AI slowly robs us of both the need and the drive to create and value our own content and finally influence human creativity and intelligence. When we interact with AI, we are consciously or unconsciously influenced by it. The more information we are exposed to AI, the more we are influenced by it. To put it starkly, our thoughts are being influenced and even reshaped.

Social media is a good precedent: most of the negative impacts from social media were the predictable outcomes of a design philosophy that prioritized engagement over human well-being. Today, our efforts to mitigate hate speech or toxic text are akin to treating the symptoms of a late-stage disease, while ignoring the underlying pathology. The root cause is the persistent speed asymmetry that allows transformative technologies to reshape our cognitive scaffolds before governance can even define the stakes. If we continue this reactive pattern with AI, we risk arriving at a point where the damage to human agency is not only undeniable but irreversible.

What makes this moment uniquely dangerous is the intersection of invisible influence with developmental vulnerability. Today's digital natives are forming their frameworks, their patterns of attention, evaluation, and reasoning, within algorithmically mediated environments from childhood. Neuroscience reveals particular vulnerability during adolescence: the prefrontal cortex responsible for critical evaluation, remains under development until the mid-twenties, while highly active reward systems make young users especially susceptible to engagement-optimized feeds (Arain et al., 2013; De et al., 2025).

Cognitive habits formed during this period tend to persist. When an entire generation shares such habits, including information-processing patterns shaped by recommendation algorithms, creative instincts entangled with generative AI, and emotional responses mediated by anthropomorphic chatbots, the implications become civilizational. This generation will become the workforce, voters, and decision-makers in the near future. If their conception of reality has been shaped by systems optimized for engagement rather than accuracy, what kind of democracy will they sustain? What kind of innovation will they produce if their creative instincts have been subtly homogenized by similar AI tools?

Here lies the crucial asymmetry with other global challenges. Nuclear weapons can be dismantled; cities can be rebuilt after a war. Carbon emissions can, theoretically, be reversed over centuries. But cognition, once shaped during critical developmental periods, does not simply reset. There is no "cognitive remediation" for a generation whose thinking patterns were formed within algorithmic systems. The window for protection is childhood and adolescence, happening now, in real time, while policymakers debate whether regulation might slow innovation.

### **The Governance Gap: A Collective Action Failure**

Technology companies optimize for engagement because their business models demand it: not from malevolence but from market logic. Governments prioritize AI development out of geopolitical necessity rather than indifference to citizens. As French President Macron declared at the 2025 Paris AI Summit: "If we regulate before we innovate, we won't have any innovation of our own" (Srivastava, 2025). Users embrace personalized services because they genuinely improve their daily experience.

Each actor behaves reasonably. But the outcome is a generation developing their cognitive frameworks within systems optimized for engagement rather than truth, autonomy, or diversity. This is the structure of collective action failure: rational individual decisions producing irrational collective consequences. Cognitive reshaping produces people who may feel better served than ever, while their capacity for independent thought quietly erodes.

The governance gap is not accidental. As Brcic (2025) argued, AI systems capable of shaping cognition have become strategic infrastructure: the nation whose platforms achieve global reach gains has the potential to influence how populations perceive reality. Weak regulation may therefore be less a failure than a calculated trade-off, using citizens' cognitive autonomy in exchange for geopolitical advantage. The TikTok controversy in the US reflects precisely this fear: not merely data privacy concerns, but anxiety about which nation's algorithms shape which population's minds (Filipiak, 2025). As AI, including Generative AI, becomes embedded in how people write, think and create, the question about whose systems shape whose cognition becomes far more intimate, and harder to trace. Everyone worries about being influenced, but no one wants to limit their own capacity to influence others.

### **Building Cognitive Sanctuaries—A Concrete System**

Given these stakes, I argue that regulation alone is not enough. This essay proposes cognitive sanctuary networks to fundamentally protect human intelligence. These networks aim to protect cognitive development from engagement optimization during the ages 13-25.

Like their bodies need protection during growth, their mind during cognitive development also requires safeguards. The challenge now is not a lack of information, but a flood of information. Flooded with content but starved of guidance, a generation may grow up unable to distinguish truth from falsehood, wisdom from noise. Thus, they need more critical thinking training and cognitive protection during their growth; they need to learn through effort rather than algorithmic ease, to encounter diverse perspectives rather than curated sameness, and to experience unmediated moments free from constant algorithmic intermediation.

Precedents exist but remain fragmented. The EU AI Act prohibits manipulative AI and mandates transparency (Future of Life Institute, n.d.). Australia banned social media for minors (Livingstone, 2025). China enforces developmental modes (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2024). But these reactive regulations address symptoms, not causes. They prohibit specific harms but construct no developmental alternatives. Prohibition is impossible; algorithmic ubiquity is a reality. The goal, therefore, is not to ban AI, but to immunize the developing mind against its invisible influence.

The cognitive sanctuary networks reverse the logic of commercial platforms. Where commercial platforms optimize for time-on-screen, our sanctuary optimizes for cognitive development. For users aged 13-18, there is no algorithmic personalization: no recommendation engines and no filter bubbles. Instead, content is curated for diversity: through randomization, editorial curation, and diversity quotas that guarantee perspectives from across geographic, cultural, and ideological lines. Besides, our sanctuary also requires cognitive practice. AI here functions differently. It does not generate essays or summarize readings. It asks questions: What is your evidence? What would the opposing view argue? Students cannot complete assignments by accepting AI outputs; they must demonstrate engagement with multiple perspectives before submission.

To finance this infrastructure, we propose a cognitive impact tax designed to align corporate incentives with public health. Companies using recommendation algorithms or generative AI would face a baseline levy on global revenue like 3%. But companies that contribute to the sanctuary system, through funding and open-source models, would face a lower rate of 1%. Furthermore, companies could qualify by integrating their global expert networks into the Sanctuary's literacy infrastructure, ensuring the systematic transfer of algorithmic knowledge to educators and students. This transforms the incentive structure. Tech giants become partners, not obstacles. The numbers are significant. Microsoft alone generates over \$280 billion in annual revenue (Microsoft, 2025). A 1% contribution would yield \$2.8 billion per year from a single company. Apply this across major platforms, and the funding becomes sufficient to reach millions of students around the world.

Implementation would begin where the problem is most acute: societies with high digital penetration, where young people spend significant portions of their lives within algorithmically mediated environments. As the model matures, it can be a global standard.

### **From Competition to Cooperation**

This is not idealism; it is market logic. Consider the demographic: by 2050, 90% of the world's youth will live in the Global South (UNESCO, 2023). When nations like India or the African Union collectively negotiate standards, they are not just making policy; they are gatekeeping the world's largest growth markets.

When these nations coordinate on cognitive protection standards, tech companies face a straightforward calculation. Cooperate, and gain access to billions of users through a single regulatory framework. Refuse and face the alternative: a patchwork of national bans, incompatible rules, and market-by-market negotiations. The levy is not punishment; it is the price of admission.

This mirrors successful precedents: OECD minimum corporate tax coordinated 140 countries (OECD, n.d.); Paris Agreement showed competing nations cooperate on existential risks (United Nations, n.d.); GDPR proved EU can force global compliance (European Union, 2016). When enough markets align,

even the largest corporations adapt. The question is not whether tech giants want to participate, it is whether they can afford to be excluded.

## Conclusion

We stand at an unusual historical moment: aware that something significant is happening to human cognition, yet unable to see it clearly. There is no sudden crisis to force our hand. The systems reshaping how we think are not enemies to be defeated, but tools that have outpaced our capacity to govern them. Their influence feels like service. Their transformation feels like improvement. That is precisely why they are so hard to resist.

To avoid this future, I have proposed a concrete framework: Sanctuaries for cognitive development, and a cognitive impact tax that turns tech giants from obstacles into partners. This is not just policy; it is self-defense.

A generation is growing up inside algorithmic environments right now. Our minds are being shaped while policymakers debate whether the shaping is real. If we wait for absolute certainty, we will know exactly what we lost, but it will be too late to get it back. The question is not whether AI will influence us; it already does. The question is whether we will build the alternatives necessary to remain the authors of our own minds—before the window for doing so quietly closes.

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### Auxiliary Aids Directory (Example – adapt to your usage)

| Aid              | Usage                       | Affected parts   |
|------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Grammarly        | Spell and grammar check     | Complete paper   |
| ChatGPT          | Text polishing              | Introduction: Paragraph 3<br>The Warm Water: Why We Cannot Feel the Change: Paragraph 3; Paragraph 4&6<br>The Governance Gap: Paragraph 3, sentence 4<br>Building Cognitive Sanctuaries—A Concrete System: Paragraph 2, sentence 2; Paragraph 3, sentence 5<br>Conclusion: Paragraph 1, sentence 3 |
| Google Translate | Translation of text passage | Introduction: Paragraph 2, sentence 1.<br>The Warm Water: Why We Cannot Feel the Change: Paragraph 1, sentence 1&2   |

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|--------|-------------------------------------|--|
|        |                                     | Building Cognitive Sanctuaries—A Concrete System: Paragraph 3, sentence 4; Paragraph 6 |
| Zotero | Compilation of the literature index | Literature index   |

**Word Count (essay text only):** (2028 /2100)