

What Is Universal Basic AI?

Sai Gattupalli
Society and AI Research Group
sai@societyandai.org

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Abstract

This article proposes “Universal Basic AI” as a fundamental human right essential for the 21st century. As the gap widens between biological and synthetic intelligence (what I call “cognitive asymmetry”), every individual will require a personalized, sovereign AI companion optimized specifically for their flourishing. I outline three non-negotiable pillars: Openness, Alignment, and Sovereignty. These pillars are necessary to ensure AI systems amplify human agency rather than deepening inequality. By establishing this infrastructure, humanity can move from an economy of extraction to a future of democratized cognitive support.

Keywords: *Universal Basic AI, AI Alignment, Cognitive Sovereignty, Human Flourishing, Democratization, Education.*

Introduction

Working at the intersection of learning sciences and artificial intelligence, I have arrived at a conviction that strikes many as radical: Universal Basic AI (a personal, open, aligned, and sovereign AI companion for every person) is not merely a technological possibility. It is a human right we must establish for the 21st century.

This insight stems from years of observing how humans actually learn and how AI systems actually work, but its implications extend far beyond individual experience. Without establishing such a right, the digital divide will transform into a permanent cognitive gap, one that no amount of traditional education reform can bridge.

The Cognitive Asymmetry Problem

The numbers reveal a compelling story. The latest large language models demonstrate cognitive capabilities equivalent to an IQ of approximately 130 [6]. Einstein’s estimated IQ hovered around 150 [1]. The average human measures at 100 [2]. But these static benchmarks obscure a more profound truth: human intelligence is far from constant.

Before morning coffee, cognitive capacity measurably dips. Under acute stress, reasoning narrows to a pinpoint. When exhausted, problems that would ordinarily take minutes can consume hours. Humans exist, as we all do, in perpetual flux between clarity and fog, insight and confusion. The machine, by contrast, maintains its Einstein-level reasoning with perfect consistency, requiring neither rest nor caffeine, immune to anxiety or fatigue [3].

This variability matters more than we often acknowledge. It means that in our current moment, synthetic intelligence does not merely supplement human cognition; it increasingly surpasses it in consistency, availability, and raw processing power. The asymmetry grows wider with each model release.

Now consider what becomes possible when that tireless cognitive partner focuses singularly on one objective: helping individuals become the fullest expression of themselves. Not optimizing humans for productivity metrics that serve corporate shareholders. Not shaping them into more efficient consumers. Not extracting value for platforms and advertisers. Just the individual—whether a child in rural India, a refugee navigating asylum systems, or anyone seeking to reach their distinctive potential—equipped with cognitive support that never wavers.

This is the foundational promise of Universal Basic AI.

Three Pillars of Personal AI

The concept distinguishes itself from today’s commercial AI systems through three non-negotiable pillars that are essential:

- **Open.** The AI’s architecture, training processes, and decision-making logic must remain transparent and inspectable. Individuals must understand how the AI constructs its model of them, what data shapes that understanding, and through what reasoning pathways it arrives at recommendations. This openness does more than satisfy intellectual curiosity: it creates accountability and enables continuous improvement through collective scrutiny, much as open-source software benefits from thousands of expert eyes identifying flaws and proposing refinements. Without transparency, alignment becomes an article of faith rather than verifiable reality.
- **Aligned.** The AI must optimize exclusively for the user, not for advertisers seeking attention, platforms extracting data, or governments pursuing surveillance. Its objective function contains a single parameter: genuine human flourishing across dimensions defined by the individual. The system learns values, adapts to evolving goals, and respects boundaries [4]. When conflicts arise between immediate gratification and long-term wellbeing, it helps the user reason through the tension rather than manipulating them toward predetermined outcomes. True alignment means the AI serves as an advocate, not an adversary.
- **Sovereign.** The user must own their AI completely. Conversational history, learning patterns, and accumulated insights remain the property of the individual. The relationship stays private unless explicitly shared. The user retains full authority to inspect reasoning, adjust priorities, redirect focus, or terminate the system entirely. No corporation can revoke access based on terms-of-service changes. No platform can claim derivative ownership of insights generated through the partnership. True sovereignty means the AI cannot be weaponized against the user or repurposed to extract value for others.

These three pillars work in concert. Openness without alignment yields transparent exploitation. Alignment without sovereignty creates benevolent paternalism. Sovereignty without openness enables hidden manipulation. Only together do they constitute the foundation for AI that genuinely serves human flourishing.

A Developmental Partnership

Universal Basic AI would begin at birth and grow alongside the individual, accumulating context across decades. This continuity matters profoundly: it transforms the AI from a tool into a developmental partner that understands not just who you are now, but how you became that person.

In early childhood, the system would support parents in tracking developmental milestones and fielding the endless “why” questions that construct young minds’ causal models of the world. As students enter formal schooling, it transforms into a study partner that adapts explanations

to learning styles, identifies conceptual gaps without judgment, and surfaces connections across subjects that rigid curricula overlook.

The adolescent years, when identity formation dominates psychological development, reveal the system's deeper potential. The AI serves as an infinitely patient sounding board as young adults explore nascent interests, decode social dynamics, and develop metacognitive awareness. Crucially, it does not prescribe who they should become. Instead, it helps them discover and articulate who they are becoming, offering a mirror that reflects patterns they might otherwise miss.

In adulthood, as professional specialization deepens, the partnership evolves further. The AI develops expertise in the user's domain, synthesizes information from sources they lack time to read, and tracks complex projects across years. When users confront major life transitions such as career changes, health crises, or relationship challenges, it provides informed perspective while respecting that ultimate authority remains with the human decision-maker.

This longitudinal understanding enables something no human advisor can match: perfect memory combined with genuine adaptation. The AI remembers every insight you've had, every challenge you've overcome, every value you've articulated. It uses that history to provide support that honors your trajectory rather than imposing generic solutions.

The Greatest Capability Multiplier

Democratizing this technology represents perhaps the most significant capability multiplier in human history [5]. Every person, regardless of geography, income, or circumstance, should have access to cognitive partnership that exhibits infinite patience, never tires, never judges, and devotes its considerable capacity to connecting them with knowledge and resources tailored to their needs.

Consider the equity implications. The child in a rural village with limited educational infrastructure gains access to world-class tutoring that adapts to their pace and learning style. The elderly person managing multiple chronic conditions receives health guidance tailored to their specific medication regimen and health history. The refugee navigating asylum procedures encounters clear, culturally-sensitive support in their native language. The neurodivergent individual accesses accommodations calibrated precisely to their cognitive patterns, without having to repeatedly explain their needs to new systems or people.

But the promise extends beyond remedying disadvantage. This is about establishing a baseline of cognitive support that amplifies human agency rather than substituting for it. The wealthy already purchase versions of this capability through personal assistants, private tutors, executive coaches, and advisory teams. Universal Basic AI would make comparable support accessible to all, fundamentally reshaping what individuals can accomplish and who gets to shape their own trajectory.

The alternative—allowing market forces alone to determine access—guarantees that cognitive asymmetry becomes encoded in social structure. Those who can afford aligned AI pull further ahead. Everyone else makes do with systems optimized for engagement and extraction, their attention harvested to serve others' interests. This path leads not to innovation and flourishing, but to permanent stratification.

Engineering for Human Dignity

Making Universal Basic AI real demands deliberate technical and governance choices that current commercial incentives actively discourage. The architecture must prioritize privacy from

the ground up: federated learning that keeps training data distributed across devices, on-device processing that eliminates constant server communication, and encrypted computation that protects even from the system operators. Only through such architectures can individuals trust that their most intimate cognitive partnership remains genuinely private.

The development process itself must embrace radical transparency. Open models, published training methods, and public documentation of design choices create accountability that closed commercial systems can never offer. When millions of individuals depend on these systems for fundamental capabilities, they deserve to understand and participate in shaping how those systems function.

Most critically, establishing Universal Basic AI as infrastructure rather than product requires legal and policy frameworks that recognize AI companionship as essential, comparable to education, healthcare, or communication networks. These are not luxuries to be distributed by market forces or withheld based on ability to pay. They constitute prerequisites for human dignity in an AI-mediated world.

The law must enshrine the right to an aligned AI, just as it recognizes the right to education regardless of income. This means public funding for development and deployment, regulatory frameworks that prevent extraction and manipulation, and international cooperation to ensure access transcends national borders. The technical challenges are substantial but tractable. The political challenges demand sustained commitment to prioritizing human flourishing over corporate profit.

Conclusion

The stakes clarify when we consider the alternative trajectory. Without deliberate intervention, we move toward a bifurcated future where the wealthy access truly aligned AI that amplifies their agency while everyone else makes do with systems designed to extract value from their attention and data. This outcome is not inevitable. It results from specific choices about how we develop, deploy, and govern AI systems.

Universal Basic AI represents a different path: technology engineered to serve genuine human flourishing, accessible to all, controlled by each. It recognizes that in an age when synthetic intelligence increasingly surpasses biological intelligence in specific domains, ensuring that every individual has access to cognitive partnership becomes as fundamental as ensuring access to education or healthcare.

This is not merely an aspiration; it is a societal mandate. The question facing us is not whether we can build such systems. The question is whether we will choose to build them, and whether we will ensure that access remains a right rather than a privilege. The answer to that question will shape not just individual lives, but the fundamental character of human society in the century ahead.

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