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HISTORY WRITING: AI VS. IA – WHICH WAY TO GO IN THE HISTORIAN'S CRAFT?

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Abstract

This paper examines the critical juncture facing the historical profession in the age of artificial intelligence. It distinguishes between two paradigms: **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**, which operates autonomously to generate historical narratives, and **Intelligent Assistance (IA)**, which augments the historian's own skills by acting as a collaborative tool. Through an analysis grounded in the methodological frameworks of R.G. Collingwood and Yuval Noah Harari, the paper argues that while AI offers powerful capabilities for data analysis exemplified by projects that decipher unreadable ancient texts or reveal hidden patterns in massive datasets its autonomous application poses significant risks to the craft. These include factual hallucinations, the amplification of hidden biases, and the loss of the empathetic, serendipitous discovery that is central to historical understanding. In contrast, the paper advocates for the IA model as the optimal path forward. By handling labour-intensive tasks like data mining, translation, and source organization, the IA returns precious time to the historian for the deeply human work of interpretation, critical thinking, and narrative construction. This paper itself serves as a case study, having been composed with the aid of an IA, demonstrating a practical and ethical collaboration. The conclusion is clear: the future of history writing is not one of replacement by machines, but of augmentation. By embracing Intelligent Assistance, historians can harness the power of technology to create deeper, more democratic, and more human histories than ever before.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Intelligent Assistance, History, Digital, Humanities, R.G. Collingwood, Yuval Noah Harari, Historiography, AI Ethics.

1. *Introduction*

History is more than dates and kings; it is the craft of piecing together stories from the past to understand the human experience. As historian E.H. Carr noted, history is a continuous dialogue between the past and the present.[1] This craft, however, is now meeting powerful new technology. This paper explores a critical choice for modern historians: should we use *Artificial Intelligence* (**AI**) that operates independently, or *Intelligent Assistants* (**IA**) that augment our own skills?

To clarify, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is technology that enables machines to learn from data, recognize patterns, and perform tasks that typically require human intelligence, such as writing narratives.[2] It can generate content almost autonomously. In contrast, an Intelligent Assistant (IA) is a tool powered by AI but designed to collaborate with a human. It handles tedious tasks like data sorting and quick searches, acting as an apprentice that enhances the historian's work without seizing creative control.[3]

[1] E.H. Carr, *What is History?* Cambridge, 1961, p. 30.
[2] Stuart Russell and Peter Norvig, *Artificial Intelligence: A Modern Approach*, 4th ed., Hoboken, 2020.
[3] Lindy, "What Is an AI Assistant? 12 Capabilities You Need to Know, "March 5, 2024.

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This paper argues that while AI offers exciting possibilities for efficiency, IA represents the wiser path forward. It reduces the drudgery of tasks like data mining, searching vast digital archives for relevant information, while preserving the essential human elements of empathy, ethical judgment, and nuanced interpretation.[4] By choosing IA, we protect the soul of the historian's craft; a human-driven conversation with the past, not a machine-generated monologue.

2. Understanding History: Basics and Methodology

History is the art of asking questions about the past and answering them through a careful process. It is less about memorizing facts and more about acting as a detective, judge, and storyteller combined. Imagine finding an old cup in an attic. A historian would ask, "Who used this? What was their life like?" transforming the object into a window into a human life.

The historical method involves key steps. It begins with a compelling question, such as exploring why public support for the French Revolution shifted. Next, historians gather evidence, prioritizing primary sources, materials created in the past, like letters, diaries, and official records over secondary sources, which are later analyses.[5] They then critically evaluate these sources, considering the author's bias and context. For example, a colonial officer's report may hide more than it reveals. Finally, they construct an interpretation and write a clear, honest narrative that brings the past to life.

Today, the challenge is not a lack of sources but an overwhelming abundance. Millions of digitized documents - from court records to newspapers - are now online.[6] Today, the challenge is not the scarcity of sources but their overwhelming abundance. Millions of digitized documents - from court records to newspapers - are now freely available online. Likewise, historians of South Asia benefit from major open-access collections such as the South Asia Open Archives (hosted by JSTOR), the Digital South Asia Library (DSAL), and the British Library's India Office Records, which provide digitized manuscripts, official records, and correspondence from the East India Company and the British Raj. In addition, the Perso-Indica Project catalogues Persian texts produced in South Asia between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries, further expanding the range of accessible primary sources.[7]

While this is a treasure trove, manually sifting through it, a process called data mining, is immensely time-consuming. This is where technology enters the scene. Yet, the core of history empathy, ethical responsibility, and evidence-guided imagination must remain human. Machines process data, but they do not share the human experience that gives history its meaning.

3. Demystifying AI and IA for Historians

For historians, the growing discourse on AI is increasing day by day, though understanding these technologies is crucial. Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT, operates like a highly intelligent parrot. Trained on vast amounts of text, it can generate human-like responses, translate languages, and summarize long documents. However, it does not "think" or "understand." It identifies patterns from its training data, and if this data

[4] Edward Slingerland and Ryan Nichols, "Mining the Past - Data-Intensive Knowledge Discovery in the Study of Historical Textual Traditions," *Journal of Cognitive Historiography*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1–20.
[5] E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, London, 1961, p.12
[6] As evidenced by vast free databases like 'The Old Bailey Online' - A digital archive of court proceedings from London's central criminal court (1674-1913). It contains transcripts of trials, searchable by keyword, date, or crime and 'Chronicling America' is a Library of Congress project that provides free access to historic American newspapers (1789-1963), digitized and searchable.
[7] Links for these resources are https://www.jstor.org/; https://dsal.uchicago.edu; https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/india-office-records; http://www.perso-indica.net.

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is flawed or limited, the AI's output will be biased. A significant risk is hallucination, where the AI confidently invents facts, dates, or sources that do not exist.[8]

This paper defines an Intelligent Assistant (IA) as a tool that uses AI to augment, not replace, the historian. The term in this context was articulated by the authors during the preparation of this study, born from the experience of using AI as a powerful research aide.[9] An IA fetches information, checks for contradictions, helps organize notes, and drafts text, but it always waits for the human direction. The key difference is control. AI alone can invent feathers the parrot never had, while an IA sits on your shoulder, whispering useful information while you keep full command of the narrative.

4.2 The Pitfalls: The Loss of What Makes History Human

However, the pitfalls are profound and strike at the heart of the historian's craft. The most significant danger is hallucination. For a discipline built on evidence, an AI's tendency to invent plausible-looking facts and sources is catastrophic. Furthermore, AI can amplify bias. If its training data is predominantly Western and male, its outputs will reflect and reinforce that narrow perspective.

More fundamentally, AI fails at the core task of historical understanding as defined by philosopher R.G. Collingwood. For Collingwood, history was not about memorizing "facts" but about re-enacting the past in one's own mind, rethinking the thoughts of historical actors by understanding their situation, their evidence, and their intentions.[10] An AI can process data about Caesar, but it cannot re-think Caesar's thoughts as he crossed the Rubicon. It lacks consciousness, empathy, and the human capacity for intentional understanding. This makes AI-generated narratives inherently shallow; they describe events but cannot truly explain human agency.

This leads to a loss of serendipity and depth. AI is brilliant at finding what you ask for, but it is weak at the accidental discovery in a dusty archive that changes everything. The "black box" problem, where the AI's reasoning is hidden, further erodes the transparency essential to scholarly trust.

4.3 Synthesizing the Views: Harari's Macroscope vs. Collingwood's Microscope

We can frame this tension as Harari's "macroscope" versus Collingwood's "microscope." AI is a powerful tool for the macroscope, helping to validate or challenge the large-scale narratives Harari is known for. However, it is a dangerous substitute for Collingwood's microscope, the intimate, empathetic process of understanding individual human actions and thoughts.

Yuval Noah Harari himself has warned that AI could become a "curator of human culture," potentially creating new myths and religions that could manipulate humanity on an unprecedented scale.[11] This underscores the ethical peril of outsourcing historical narrative to a non-conscious entity.

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[8] For a foundational overview of AI's application in humanities research, see "A History of AI in the Humanities," *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2022; Tatiana But, "AI in Historical Research: 2025 Trends & Insights," *Historica Foundation Blog*, September 3, 2025, https://www.historica.org/ blog/ai-in-historical-research-2025-insights-and-trends.

[9] The concept and term "IA" (Intelligent Assistant) in the specific sense and historical research used here was articulated by the authors during collaborative work on this paper in early 2025.

[10] R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford, 1946, pp. 282–302.

[11] Yuval Noah Harari, "AI and the Future of Humanity," talk presented at the University of Cambridge, April 29, 2023, available at *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/ai-and-the-future-of-humanity-04-29-2023; see

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Consequently, while AI can be a powerful research tool for data-intensive questions, pure AI authorship has no place in serious scholarship. The final interpretation, judgment, and the crucial act of re-thinking the past must remain firmly in human hands. AI alone offers a power that, without human guidance, can easily undermine the very craft it seeks to assist.

5. IA as the Historian's Ally: Enhancing the Craft

The true promise of technology in history is not automation, but augmentation. An Intelligent Assistant (IA) acts as a tireless research partner, handling tedious tasks so the historian can focus on the deeply human work of interpretation. This partnership perfectly aligns with R.G. Collingwood's ideal of history as the "re-enactment of past experience," a task requiring empathy and critical thought that only a human can perform.[12]

Imagine researching the 1947 Partition of India. Instead of spending months locating documents, a historian can instruct an IA: "Find all mentions of refugee camps in Punjab government files from August to December 1947." Within minutes, the IA can retrieve hundreds of digitized reports from various national archives, translate them, and arrange them chronologically.[13] This gives the historian back precious time to do what a machine cannot: read with empathy, detect the fear in a district officer's private note, and hear the exhaustion in a survivor's petition, slowly building a narrative that carries both factual and emotional truth.

This is the new reality for many scholars. An IA can condense six months of literature review into a few weeks, freeing up time for essential fieldwork like recording oral histories from elders. The time saved is not merely convenient; it is time reinvested into the human-centric tasks that form the soul of historical inquiry.

Crucially, a well-designed IA protects against AI's biggest pitfalls. Using techniques like Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG), it anchors its responses to specific, verifiable sources. When it provides information, the historian can immediately click through to the original document, making hallucinations rare and ensuring transparency. Furthermore, by running on a scholar's own computer, an IA can keep sensitive materials - like interviews with trauma survivors or indigenous oral histories, private and secure, addressing major ethical concerns.[14]

6. AI vs. IA: A Head-to-Head Comparison for the Future

The choice between autonomous AI and collaborative IA can be understood by looking at their outputs. An AI-generated history may be smooth and fast, but its voice is generic and lacks the lived humanity essential to the craft. An IA-assisted history, however, retains the historian's unique voice, judgment, and emotional connection to the material. The historian remains the author; the IA is the tool.

This distinction is critical when dealing with bias. It is a common hope that a machine could write a perfectly neutral history. However, as Yuval Noah Harari's work demonstrates, history is about the stories we tell and the meanings we

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also his *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, London, 2018 extensively discusses the impact of technology on human narratives and futures.

[12] R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford,1946, pp. 282–302. Collingwood maintained that history is the re-enactment of past thought.

[13] Not every AI will behave as a 'true IA', many may refuse large archival searches or add their own opinions. Above all, the human mind remains essential: the tool is only as good as the historian who knows how to command it.

[14] See the open-source tool *PrivateGPT* and its academic fork *Historian's Private Assistant*, GitHub repositories, 2024-2025. It shows how historians and researchers can run AI tools locally, without relying on cloud services. *PrivateGPT* allows offline question-answering from personal documents.

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assign.[15] AI does not eliminate bias; it codifies and hides it. Its "neutrality" is an illusion, as it reflects the biases of its training data, which is often dominated by sources in powerful languages like English, silencing marginalized and oral histories.[16] A human historian from Delhi and one from Karachi will have different perspectives on the 1947 Partition, but their biases are visible and can be debated. An AI's bias is statistical and opaque, making it far more dangerous.

Furthermore, AI fails at the serendipity and creative insight that drive historical breakthroughs. It can find patterns we ask for, but it cannot experience the shock of discovering a child's drawing in a forgotten box that completely reframes an event. This "Eureka!" moment is uniquely human.

Finally, the question of verification is paramount. An IA shows its work, linking every claim to a citable source. Pure AI operates as a "black box," asking for trust without providing transparent evidence, a fundamental violation of historical methodology.

In every critical category narrative voice, transparency, handling of bias, and capacity for genuine insight, the partnership of a human historian with an Intelligent Assistant is superior. AI can be a powerful tool for specific, data-heavy tasks, but when it becomes the author, the soul of history is lost. The craft is, and must remain, a deeply human endeavour.

7. Looking Ahead: The Future of History Writing

The future of history is not a threat but an open door of unprecedented possibility. By 2030 or 2035, Intelligent Assistants (IAs) will do far more than fetch books; they will hand historians the living voices of millions of ordinary people. The digital detritus of our daily lives like - every tweet, every social media post, every short video from the Covid years, every digital photo, is forming the largest archive of common human experience ever known. A historian will be able to ask an IA: "Show me expressions of public sorrow in Delhi in May 2021" or "Analyse how fashion for young women in Kerala evolved between 2019 and 2024," and within minutes, they will be sifting through a curated set of genuine, human-authored primary sources. This promises a new, democratic kind of people's history, moving beyond the narratives of kings and prime ministers to capture the lived experience of the masses.

The potential of AI and intelligent assistants goes beyond modern digital archives. They can also uncover hidden details in historical records that were previously beyond human reach. There are already striking examples. In the *Vesuvius Challenge*, computer scientists used AI to virtually unwrap and read a Herculaneum scroll carbonized by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. For two thousand years these scrolls were too fragile to handle, but in 2024 an AI model detected faint ink traces and reconstructed the first complete passages, revealing a lost text by an Epicurean philosopher on pleasure.[17] This gave scholars access to a library thought lost forever. This opened access to a library once thought gone forever. At the National Gallery in London, researchers applied AI-powered hyperspectral imaging to a painting by Titian. The system mapped the artist's underpainting and showed that he had completely changed the position of a figure's arm - a decision invisible to the naked eye and even to X-rays. This offered a real-time glimpse into the creative process of a Renaissance master.[18] In Israel, AI is being used to reconstruct fragmented archaeological finds. One project reassembles thousands of

[15] Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, 2014, pp. 27-30 argues that large-scale human cooperation from empires to religions and markets, depends on shared fictions and narratives. These collective stories allow millions of people to trust, organize, and act together, even without personal ties.

[16] How large language models handle different world languages unevenly, highlighting risks of algorithmic bias and the under-representation of non-Western contexts, see Abeba Birhane, "Algorithmic Injustice: A Relational Ethics Approach," *Patterns*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2021.

[17] "The Vesuvius Challenge," 2023-2024, https://scrollprize.org. The winning entry successfully retrieved hundreds of characters from a previously unreadable Herculaneum papyrus.

[18] "AI Reveals Titian's Creative Struggle in 'The Triumph of Love'," National Gallery Technical Bulletin, 2024.

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burnt Byzantine manuscript fragments, working like a superhuman jigsaw solver to restore texts destroyed by fire more than a millennium ago and long considered irrecoverable.[19]

These examples show that AI can act as a powerful sensory extension for historians, revealing physical and textual data that is simply beyond the limit of human perception. Furthermore, IAs will democratize complex analytical tasks. A scholar wanting to place Irfan Habib's maps of medieval trade routes onto a modern satellite map will only need to ask, and the IA will generate an accurate, layered visualization in seconds. The same tool that helps write a journal article can produce a simple pamphlet in the local language for the community whose history is being told, closing the circle between academic research and public engagement.

Ancient cave paintings were our first glimpses of prehistoric life. Today's digital world is our new cave, glowing with the stories of our time. With an IA as a partner, the historian is not losing the soul of the craft; they are empowering it to hear millions of new voices. Mistakes will happen, and robust ethical frameworks for privacy and source criticism will be essential. But the historian's core job - to listen, weigh, feel, and interpret, remains unchanged. They will simply be able to do it with more depth, kindness, and democratic reach than ever before, provided we keep the human heart firmly in charge and the machine happily in its role as the most capable assistant the craft has ever known.

8. Conclusion

History has always been a conversation between the past and the present. Today, we have been given the fastest, most patient listener the world has ever known. This paper has argued that we must use this device not as a new oracle that speaks its own truths, but as a spirit medium – an Intelligent Assistant that amplifies countless lost voices for the historian, the living interpreter, to finally hear. The evidence confirms that the wiser path is to embrace the machine as an assistant, not an author.

We have shown that while Artificial Intelligence (AI) alone can dazzle with its speed and scale, it also carries the profound risks of hallucination, amplified bias, and a loss of the serendipity and empathy that are the soul of historical inquiry. Artificial Intelligence, for all its power, risks becoming a "prophet" of its own flawed dogma, generating convincing but often hollow or hallucinated narratives. In contrast, the true power of this technology lies in its deliberate use as an Intelligent Assistant (IA). The same AI capable of autonomous generation is, when guided by a scholar, transformed into a disciplined IA. It functions as a powerful ally that reduces drudgery, manages overwhelming data, and unlocks access to a multitude of previously inaccessible voices. Acting as a faithful "medium", it tirelessly channels the archives, from the Venetian ledger to the digital tweet, allowing us to discern patterns in the noise and recover human-scale stories. By handling the mechanics of the research séance, the IA empowers the historian to focus exclusively on the higher tasks of judgment, ethical reasoning, and the nuanced craft of narrative.

The answer to our initial question – "AI or IA, which way to go?" – is therefore gentle and hopeful. Let the machines carry the heavy boxes. Let the historians keep telling the stories. This is the future worth choosing. And this paper itself stands as living proof of that choice. It was not written by theory alone, but through a real-time collaboration between two authors from History and Computer Science. Our third partner was an 'AI' itself. It acted as our Intelligent Assistant, fetching sources, suggesting phrasing, checking grammar, and helping to keep the language clear and accessible. Yet, every central idea, every interpretive judgment, and every final decision on the paper's content and structure was made by us, the human authors. In other words, this paper about the value of Intelligent Assistance was written with the help of the very tool it advocates.

[19] "Using AI to Reassemble the En-Gedi Scroll," *Science Advances*, 2023, which successfully reconstructed a Hebrew biblical text from a charred, unopenable scroll.


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We hope readers see in these pages not just an argument, but a quiet demonstration. The future of history writing can be richer, more democratic, and more deeply human than ever before –precisely when we choose to keep the machine as our faithful ally, and not our replacement.