🌻 What is the Point of Us. A Sci-Fi Story for Researchers

I was talking to my friend Alberta yesterday about the open letter signed by prominent proponents of thematic analysis, rejecting the use of generative AI tools in qualitative social research. We were discussing the counter open letter initiated by Susanne Friese and signed by myself and others, saying hey it's just a tool, let's use it.

Having listened to the whole debate, Alberta said, "Yes but even you guys are kidding yourselves too, deep down you know that you researchers might still be able to meaningfully lead the research process today but tomorrow the AI won't need you will it? What's the point of us then? What is the point of our children growing up if AI can do not only technical things but also the meaning-making tasks better than we can?

So, here is a very short science fiction story to answer that.

It is the year 2040 or even earlier, somehow we haven't destroyed the planet yet, and a 40-year-old woman wants to write a Master's thesis about the reception of ground-breaking female pop artists in news and social media. She has ideas on themes and she feels deeply how this exploration might resonate and deepen themes in her own life: work, family, the role of women and men, and so on.

She wants to do this in the true heroic tradition of "Big Q" analysis: She doesn't even have a clearly defined research question, and even if she did, she knows that she would change those methods during her voyage of discovery; indeed, a documentation of those changes would be part of the project.

She is fully aware, and completely comfortable with the idea, that she could simply feed her research project description into an AI. She knows it can generate, in the twinkling of an eye, a hundred thousand different theses she might have written, coming from different angles and incorporating different theoretical worldviews. Not only that, she knows she could also feed the AI information about herself, her background, her interests, and her problems, and it could write and document a hypothetical story of her journey given her positionality and interaction with the theme and how the thesis changes in exciting and interesting ways, yet she is completely comfortable with this. It matters not in the slightest to her. Just as if she were a musician, she knows that there are already much better proponents of the instrument who could play the pieces

she wants to learn technically better than her, perhaps even injecting a humorous take on her own style as a learner into the performance. Yet she still wants to learn to actually do it herself.

So, why should she *not* write the thesis?

First of all not only do we not yet know the criteria to judge her work, we don't even know the meta-criterion? What is most important? Authenticity? Innovation? Erudition? She chooses this herself during her journey.

Secondly, the solution space is completely unsearchable. The AI could produce a million essays in minutes, but it would still never get anywhere close to filling the space of possible solutions, any more than monkeys and typewriters could.

Thirdly, and most importantly, it is only by battling her way through the "tempest of possibilities" that she can define for herself what is the right turn to take at each step. She must determine the right decision to make at each step (review the method again? present her initial findings to her peers? her family? take on board what her supervisor said? write to a colleague in America? hunt for more sources? how? with or without an AI? write a poem in place of a synopsis? tear it all up and start again? create a new way of expressing her findings, a new dialect? whether to get an AI to write a whole section and then deconstruct it?) and examine, in each case, what "right" means -- what fits for *her*.

Ultimately, she does this so that finally, she can present to herself and probably a very small readership a work that actually has a signature on it. It is something she vouches for and takes responsibility for, saying: "This is my solution. This was my journey. This is how it did actually change me, how it changed other people I interacted with: is what I found".

The act of her doing that and the way it changed her -- situated as all this is in her professional and personal life -- might even mean something to others. It might go unread, like most such theses. But it might have an echo or produce effects that even surprise all of us, and might even surprise an AI, because the solution space is effectively infinite.