Overview

The Illusion of Knowledge in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

From owning knowledge to outsourcing cognition in the digital age

By Dr. Ahmed Al-Mulaiki, Senior Academic, Culture & Values Consultant

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Summary

One of the defining dilemmas of the current knowledge era is the transition from the possession of knowledge and the ability to reproduce it toward mere access to knowledge, and then attributing that access to oneself as if it were genuine understanding. This article draws upon intellectual heritage through two classical examples:

- Ibn Hazm of Al-Andalus and his response to the burning of his books.
- Imam Al-Ghazali's encounter with highway robbers in Tus, when his notebooks were stolen.

The article argues that contemporary AI-driven environments have accelerated the shift from knowledge ownership to knowledge access, creating what may be termed the illusion of knowledge. It further proposes practical principles for preserving authentic learning and intellectual self-development in the age of generative artificial intelligence.

Knowledge Between Possession and Access

Humanity stands at a pivotal civilisational moment: are we entering a golden age of knowledge, or witnessing the deepest erosion of the knowing self in centuries?

When information becomes accessible with a single click, when algorithms generate coherent texts within seconds, and when massive books are summarised into brief paragraphs, an important question emerges: are we becoming more knowledgeable, or merely more dependent?

The article advances two central propositions:

- The distinction between *possessing knowledge* and merely *accessing it* is fundamental rather than superficial.
- Generative AI models have accelerated the transition from knowledge possession to knowledge access, creating a qualitative rupture in human cognition.

The author argues that humanity has moved beyond delegating calculation and storage to machines; it is now increasingly delegating the act of thinking itself, the cognitive process constituting human intellectual identity.

This concern aligns with research on *cognitive offloading*, where technological systems increasingly substitute for internal memory and reasoning processes (Risko and Gilbert, 2016).

Ibn Hazm and the Internalisation of Knowledge

When the judge ordered the burning of the books of the Andalusian scholar Abu Muhammad Ibn Hazm (d. 456 AH) in Seville, Ibn Hazm responded with verses encapsulating a profound philosophy of knowledge (Al-Shantarīnī, 1981):

> "If you burn the parchment, you do not burn what the parchment contains, for it lives in my chest.
>
> It travels with me wherever my mounts proceed, descends when I descend, and is buried in my grave."

Ibn Hazm distinguishes between two locations of knowledge:

- the *external vessel* (the parchment),
- and the *internal vessel* (the human mind and soul).

The external container can be destroyed, but internalised knowledge cannot. The book is therefore not the ultimate objective, but merely a means through which knowledge becomes embodied within the individual.

The article emphasises that knowledge which does not inhabit its owner remains vulnerable, even if physically preserved.

Al-Ghazali's Lesson From the Highway Robbers

A similar lesson appears in the famous story of Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (d. 505 AH). During his early years of study, robbers intercepted him while travelling from Jurjan to Tus and stole the satchel containing his notes and books.

When Al-Ghazali pleaded for the return of his writings, the leader of the robbers mocked him, asking:

> *"How can you claim to know this knowledge when, after we took these papers from you, you were left without knowledge?" (Al-Subki, 1993)*

The article presents this question as strikingly relevant to the present age of artificial intelligence.

The robber unintentionally revealed a critical truth:

> *knowledge that exists only outside the individual is not truly possessed.*

Following this incident, Al-Ghazali reconsidered his approach to learning and resolved to internalise knowledge rather than merely carry it externally. The enduring influence of his intellectual legacy, centuries later, is presented as the fruit of that transformative lesson.

Today, however, the "satchel" is no longer vulnerable to theft. Digital cloud infrastructures preserve and instantly provide information. As a result, the necessity of deeply internalising knowledge has weakened.

Yet the article raises a provocative question:

What catastrophe would occur, personally and institutionally, if digital infrastructures suddenly failed?

From the Leather Satchel to the Digital Cloud

The transition from medieval manuscripts to modern AI systems is not merely a transformation of storage mediums; it represents a transformation of the knowing self. Traditional books were *passive vessels*: they required an active human reader to extract meaning.

By contrast, large language models are *active vessels*:

- they generate explanations,
- produce structured arguments,
- create visual summaries,
- and even prepare publication-ready outputs.

The danger lies in the inversion of the knowledge process:

- previously, humans extracted meaning from texts;
- now, texts increasingly extract meaning for humans.

The article asks:

What becomes of the knowing self when cognition itself is outsourced?

The Illusion of Explanatory Depth

Modern psychological literature describes this phenomenon through the concept of the **illusion of explanatory depth**, introduced by Rozenblit and Keil (2002).

Their research demonstrated that individuals often believe they understand ordinary mechanisms, such as how a bicycle works, until they are asked to explain them in detail. At that point, the superficiality of their understanding becomes evident.

Subsequent studies expanded this insight, showing that:

- the illusion is widespread rather than exceptional,
- and technological systems intensify it by creating rapid familiarity without deep comprehension.

Generative AI systems amplify this illusion further because they produce:

- coherent language,
- persuasive structure,
- confident presentation,
- and fluent explanations.

These characteristics generate what cognitive psychology calls the **illusion of fluency**: the tendency to confuse ease of processing information with genuine understanding (Rozenblit and Keil, 2002).

Cognitive Offloading and the “Google Effect”

Another explanatory concept discussed in the article is **cognitive offloading**.

Research led by Betsy Sparrow at Columbia University demonstrated that people increasingly remember *where* information can be found rather than the information itself (Sparrow, Liu and Wegner, 2011).

Human memory, according to the article, has become divided into:

- memory of *what*,

- and memory of *where*.

Search engines originally reduced memory burdens; AI systems now go further by assuming parts of the reasoning and synthesis process itself.

Consequently, the central question shifts from:

"Where can I find information?"
to:
"How should I ask for it?"

This represents a movement from memory delegation toward delegation of thinking itself.

Cognitive Laziness and Delegated Thinking

The article introduces the concept of **cognitive laziness**: a gradual tendency to delegate all mentally demanding tasks to machines, including activities traditionally valuable for their formative process rather than merely their outcomes.

Examples include:

- reflective reading,
- personal summarisation,
- memorisation,
- conceptual synthesis.

This condition resembles muscular atrophy:

- unused muscles weaken,
- and unused cognitive capacities may similarly deteriorate.

The distinction the article stresses is therefore between:

- AI as an assistant, and
- AI as a substitute.

AI as assistant	AI as substitute
Supports independent thinking	Replaces independent thinking
Helps refine ideas	Generates ideas entirely
Encourages intellectual engagement	Encourages dependency
Enhances learning	Weakens cognitive ownership

Responsibility for maintaining this distinction lies with the user, not the technology itself.

A Roadmap for Self-Learning with and Through AI

The article proposes six practical principles for sustainable self-learning in the AI era.

1. Productive intellectual friction

Avoid seeking effortless learning as an educational virtue. Read AI-generated material critically, question it, verify references directly, and engage actively with ideas rather than passively consuming them.

2. Effortful cognitive processing

Knowledge acquired without effort rarely leaves lasting traces. Individuals should:

- summarise ideas manually,
- attempt answers independently before consulting AI,
- and express understanding in their own words.

3. Internalisation through repetition and application

Knowledge becomes embedded through:

- repetition,
- practical application,
- and teaching others.

The article links this triad to traditional Islamic learning concepts:

- memorisation,
- practice,
- and instruction.

4. AI as assistant, not replacement

Use AI *after* thinking, not *before* thinking.

- Formulate your own idea first.
- Draft your own text first.
- Then use AI to test, refine, or enrich it.

The reverse process leads directly into the illusion of knowledge.

5. Critical self-awareness

True learners distinguish between:

- what they know,
- what they do not know,
- and what they mistakenly believe they know.

The simplest test is explanatory ability:

If you can explain an idea independently, you understand it.
If you cannot, you likely do not.

6. The disconnection test

Periodically disconnect from digital tools and assess what knowledge genuinely remains internalised.

The crucial question becomes:

"What knowledge would remain mine if digital systems suddenly disappeared?"

Conclusion

The article concludes that contemporary society must learn the lessons of Ibn Hazm and Al-Ghazali before paying their price.

Digital clouds may never burn, nor may highway robbers steal them, yet intellectual life will continue to demand individuals capable of genuine cognitive presence, not merely active subscriptions or premium AI plans.

Ultimately, knowledge that does not inhabit the human mind cannot truly be possessed.

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Contact

Kaizen Consulting, P.O. Box 90987, Al Taawun District, Al Taawun Commercial Center, Riyadh 11623, KSA
Phone: 920004248
Email: info@kaizen.sa