

# HYB26

Technology Edition  
AI Everywhere



**The Hotel Yearbook**  
Foresight and innovation in the global hotel industry

HY8



# **Afterword: Loving the Alien. Hospitality at the Edge of the Human Era**

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*Existence, well, what does it matter?  
I exist on the best terms I can.  
The past is now part of my future,  
The present is well out of hand.*

— Ian Curtis, *Heart and Soul*

There is a tendency, whenever a new technology emerges, to describe it using the language of those that came before it. The automobile was initially called a *horseless carriage*, early cinema was dismissed as *photographed theatre*, and the internet was variously described as a *global library*, a *digital encyclopedia*, an *electronic newspaper*, or, in one now-famous 1995 *Bill Gates* television appearance, something that even *David Letterman* struggled to distinguish from a particularly *sophisticated radio*.

Human beings rarely encounter the future on its own terms. Faced with genuine novelty, our instinct is to *domesticate* it.

Perhaps this is unavoidable: language is not merely a tool for describing reality; it is the architecture through which reality exists. As *Wittgenstein* observed, the limits of our language are, in a very real sense, the limits of our world. We inhabit semantic prisons whose boundaries are defined by vocabulary, metaphor, and shared concepts, and we cannot easily think beyond the words through which we think.

*Orwell* understood this perhaps better than anyone: in 1984, the *Party's* ultimate act of domination was the systematic reduction of language itself, because ideas that cannot be articulated eventually become difficult to imagine, and ideas that cannot be imagined cannot exist.

And perhaps every revolution (technological, social, or political) begins in a similar way: before it transforms society, it transforms its language.

Today, much of the conversation surrounding artificial intelligence remains trapped inside metaphors inherited from previous technological (r)evolutions, like medieval maps drawn after the discovery of new continents; categories that may ultimately prove as insufficient as “*horseless carriage*” was for understanding the automobile.

One of the few public figures who seemed to intuit this early was, interestingly, not a scientist or an engineer, but the artist *David Bowie*. During a legendary 1999 interview on *BBC's Newsnight*, when asked whether the internet was simply another tool, he rejected the premise entirely.

“No, it's not,” he replied. “It's an *alien life form*.”

And it is also worth remembering that *Bowie* was not speaking as a detached observer. Long before social media platforms existed, before *MySpace*, *YouTube*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, or *Spotify*, he had already become deeply involved with the emerging digital world. In 1998, he launched *BowieNet*, one of the first artist-driven ISPs, offering internet access, email accounts, online communities, chat rooms, exclusive content, collaborative projects, and direct interaction between artist and audience.

Sure, the “*alien life form*” metaphor sounded eccentric at the time, perhaps even theatrical (it was, after all, *Bowie*). Yet, with the benefit of hindsight, it feels remarkably prescient.

We tend to think of technologies as tools, instruments created by humans to achieve particular objectives. A hammer drives nails. A printing press reproduces books. A computer processes information. From this perspective, technology appears subordinate to human intention, but this understanding is profoundly incomplete.

Philosopher *Martin Heidegger* did not deny that technologies function as tools, nor that they are designed, built, and operated by human beings. Both observations are obviously correct. Yet for him, focusing exclusively on what technology does prevents us from understanding what technology *is*.

Technology should be conceived as a way in which reality becomes visible to us. *Altheia*, truth as unconcealment: the bringing forth of something that was previously hidden.

Every technological epoch, therefore, reveals aspects of reality previously concealed: the factory did not merely organize labor, but redefined human beings as units of productivity, just as the internet did not merely connect computers but reconfigured the very architecture of communication and knowledge.

The more profound question is, therefore, what kind of world will be revealed once that technology arrives, and this, perhaps, was also the intuition underlying *Bowie's* observation.

If the internet transformed what *Bowie* called the “*grey space*” between *information* and *people*, artificial intelligence appears poised to transform the grey space between *people* and *agency*. What was once an exclusively human domain is increasingly being populated by artificial entities capable of interpreting, recommending, negotiating, predicting, generating, filtering, summarizing, deciding, booking, and even paying on our behalf.

In our industry, for the first time in history, we are witnessing the emergence of a travel ecosystem in which an increasing share of decisions may be made, influenced, negotiated, filtered, optimized, or even executed by non-human entities. And that is more an *epistemological* issue than a *technological* one.

Reading the essays collected in this volume more than once, I found myself repeatedly returning to a single observation: what appears on the surface to be a collection of articles about hospitality *technology* is, in many respects, a collection of essays about *humanity*.

The discussion about answer engines is ultimately a discussion about *agency* (who decides, who chooses, and who acts). The one about AI-generated content is a discussion about *authenticity* (what it means for something to be genuinely human in an age of synthetic creation). The emergence of digital workers raises questions not merely about labor, but about *identity*.

Agentic AI is, at its core, a conversation about *autonomy* and *delegation*. Even the growing role of predictive systems forces us to confront deeper questions about uncertainty, trust, and the relationship between knowledge and decision-making.

Yet beneath all these debates lies a profoundly human problem: language itself. Every discussion about technology is, to some extent, a discussion about the words we use to make sense of it. And we're back to square one.

Even the term *artificial intelligence* may already belong to an obsolete, almost ancient conceptual framework. The adjective *artificial* carries a strong judgmental tone, often functioning as shorthand for anything that is not natural, authentic, organic, or real.

Yet there's a second layer: artificial derives from the Latin *artificium*, from *ars* and *facere*: something made with skill, art, something *man-made*. For most of human history, the distinction between human and artifact was relatively straightforward because the relationship between *creator* and *creation* remained intelligible. Human beings imagined, designed, constructed, and controlled the artifacts they produced. The artifact was, in a very real sense, crystallized intention, a projection of human agency into the material world.

Artificial intelligence introduces a fracture into this relationship. Not because these systems are conscious, sentient, or alive (claims that remain speculative), but because their behavior often emerges from layers of complexity that even their creators struggle to fully explain. This is an unprecedented situation in the history of technology: creators confronting systems whose internal dynamics cannot always be reduced to explicit design decisions.

This is why I have always found *Harari's* expression, *alien intelligence*, philosophically more compelling than *artificial intelligence*. Interestingly, it resonates strongly with *Bowie's* intuition decades earlier. Not alien in the extraterrestrial sense, but in the older meaning inherited, once again, from the Latin *alienus*: belonging to another, foreign, strange, existing beyond the sphere of the familiar self. For centuries, whenever we imagined encountering an alien intelligence, we looked toward the stars. It may turn out that the first genuinely alien intelligence humanity encounters is not waiting somewhere in a distant galaxy. It may already be waiting on our own servers.

And when we turn to the noun, *intelligence*, the problem becomes even more profound. We speak about intelligence as though it were a clearly defined phenomenon, despite the uncomfortable reality that no consensus definition exists.

Neuroscientists, psychologists, philosophers, spiritual figures, and cognitive scientists remain divided on what intelligence actually is. Perhaps it is, therefore, unsurprising that we struggle to define artificial intelligence. We are attempting to build a taxonomy for something whose fundamental nature remains contested.

This difficulty is compounded by a deeply anthropocentric habit of thought. Intelligence is almost always evaluated according to its resemblance to human cognition.

If a system behaves differently from us, it is dismissed as mechanical. This is, in many ways, a form of *speciesism*. If it behaves similarly, it is accused of *imitation*. The possibility that intelligence might exist in forms fundamentally different from our own remains difficult for us to accept. The more we insist on using ourselves as the universal benchmark, the more likely we are to misunderstand emerging forms of cognition before our eyes. Because just as flight in a jet does not have to resemble the flapping of a bird's wings, artificial intelligence may not have to resemble the operation of the human mind.

As this Yearbook goes to press, many of the debates raised in these pages remain unresolved. Perhaps they always will. The future, after all, *is not what it used to be*. Predictions fail. Technologies evolve. Business models emerge and disappear.

Yet beneath the uncertainty, one observation feels increasingly difficult to ignore: artificial intelligence is not simply changing the tools through which hospitality operates, but the cognitive environment in which both guests and businesses exist.

The contributors gathered in these pages have offered valuable perspectives on where that journey may lead. Whether they are ultimately proven right or wrong matters less than the questions they have chosen to ask.

And perhaps that is why the most important question raised by this volume has remarkably little to do with machines. It is the same question that has accompanied humanity since the beginning.

Who are *we*?

