

STARVARD RESEARCH · FIRST EDITION · OCTOBER 2026

Internet Trends 2026

How the world connects, learns, works and buys, told in real numbers from public sources. Every figure on every slide links to where it came from.

WHY THIS REPORT EXISTS

Her best calls were great. Her misses were printed too.

Called it

Mobile passing desktop. Messaging apps becoming platforms. Internet ads passing print, then TV. And the famous gap: in 2015 mobile held 24 percent of U.S. media time but 8 percent of ad spend, a gap she sized at 25 billion dollars.

Missed it

Critics said the decks sometimes stopped short of analysis. A 2013 statistic about phones being checked 150 times a day did not survive scrutiny. One study found she understated internet growth: 7 percent penetration forecast for 2010, 29 percent actual.

The method worth copying

Compilation, not primary research: UN and ITU data, Pew, company filings, every slide footnoted, and the whole thing published free while rivals kept theirs private. That is the model for this report.

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

We do not buy private data. This report is built only from strong public sources: the ITU, Pew Research, the Stanford AI Index, DataReportal, the IEA, company filings and official statistics. If a figure could not be sourced, it is not on a slide. Vintages are stated, because a 2025 number and a 2018 number are not the same kind of truth.

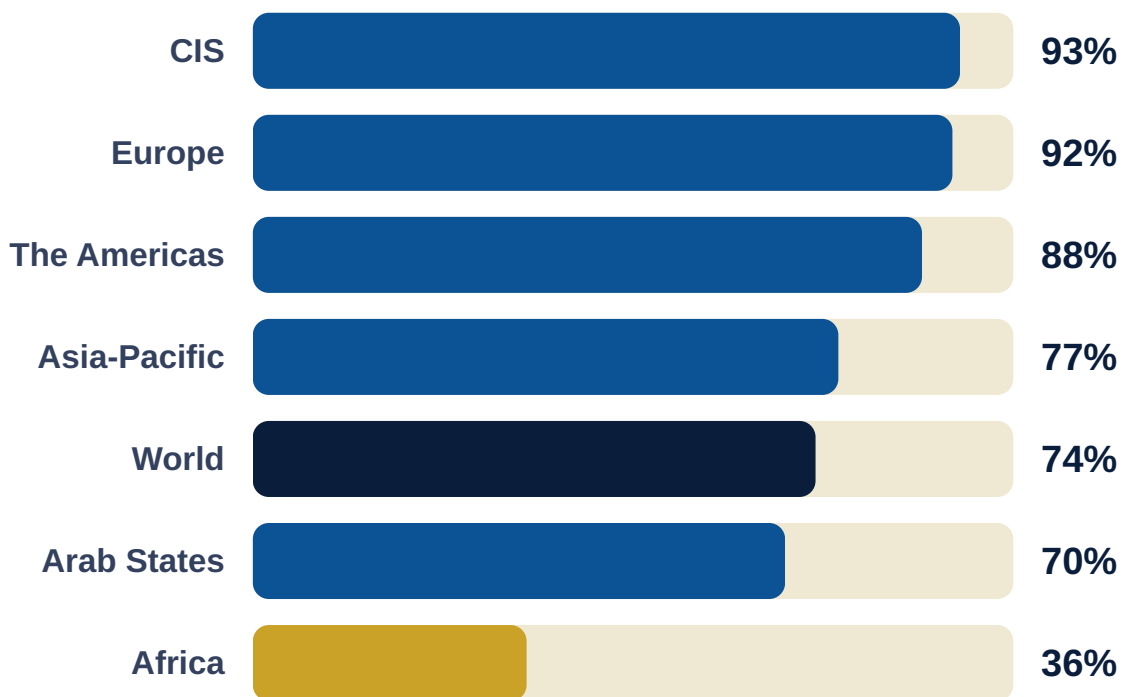
One honesty rule we kept from the first edition: where a classic chart cannot be rebuilt from public data (Meeker's time-versus-spend gap tables now sit behind a paywall), we say so on the slide instead of inventing the percentage.

01 · THE INTERNET NOW

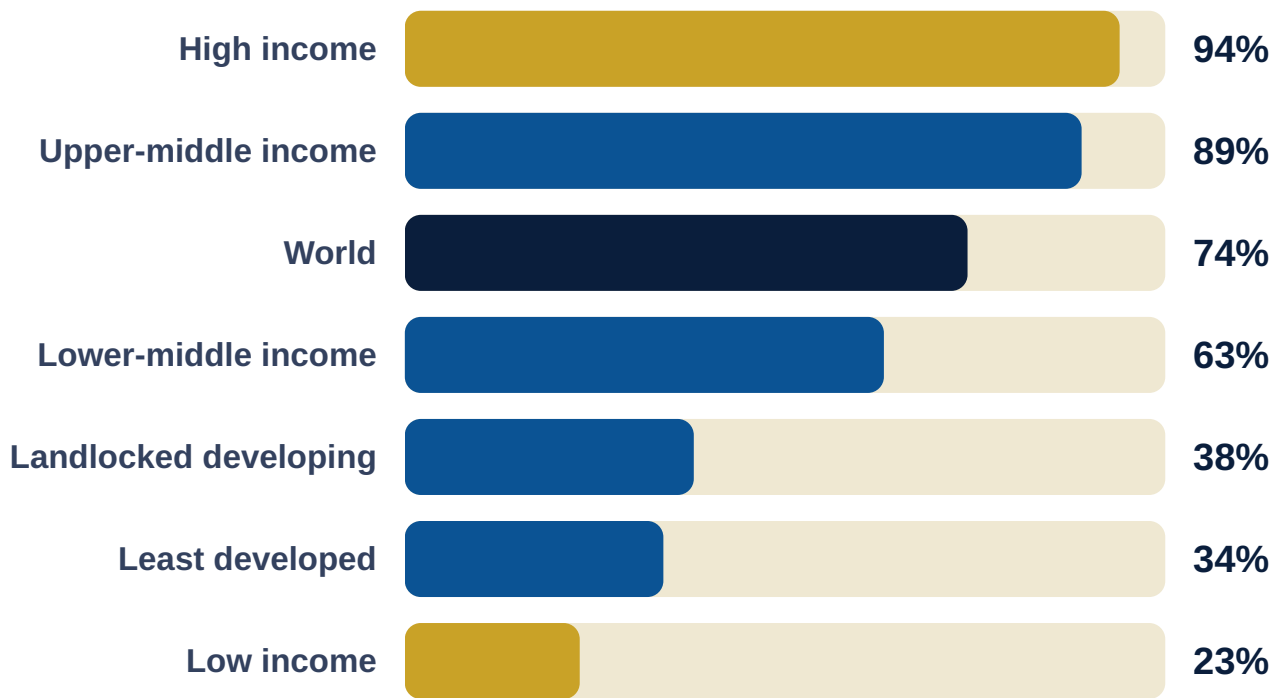
6.0B

people are online: three quarters of everyone on Earth.

Three regions are nearly done connecting. One is a third done.



01 · THE INTERNET NOW

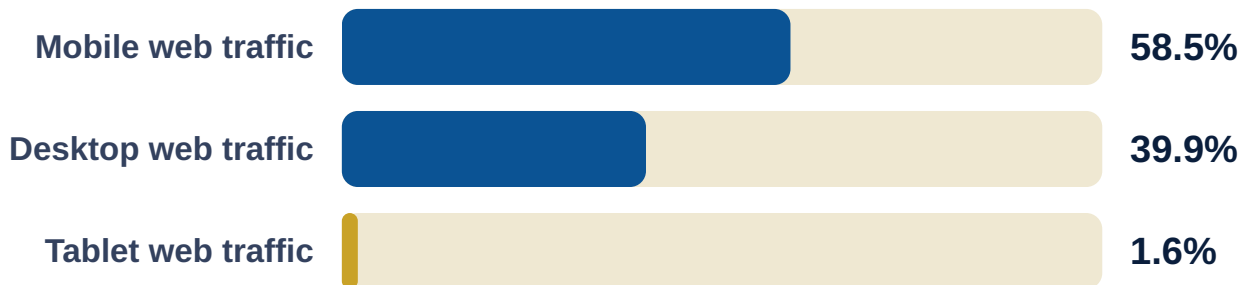


City, countryside, men, women: the gaps stack.



About 180 million more women than men are offline.

The phone won. It is not close.



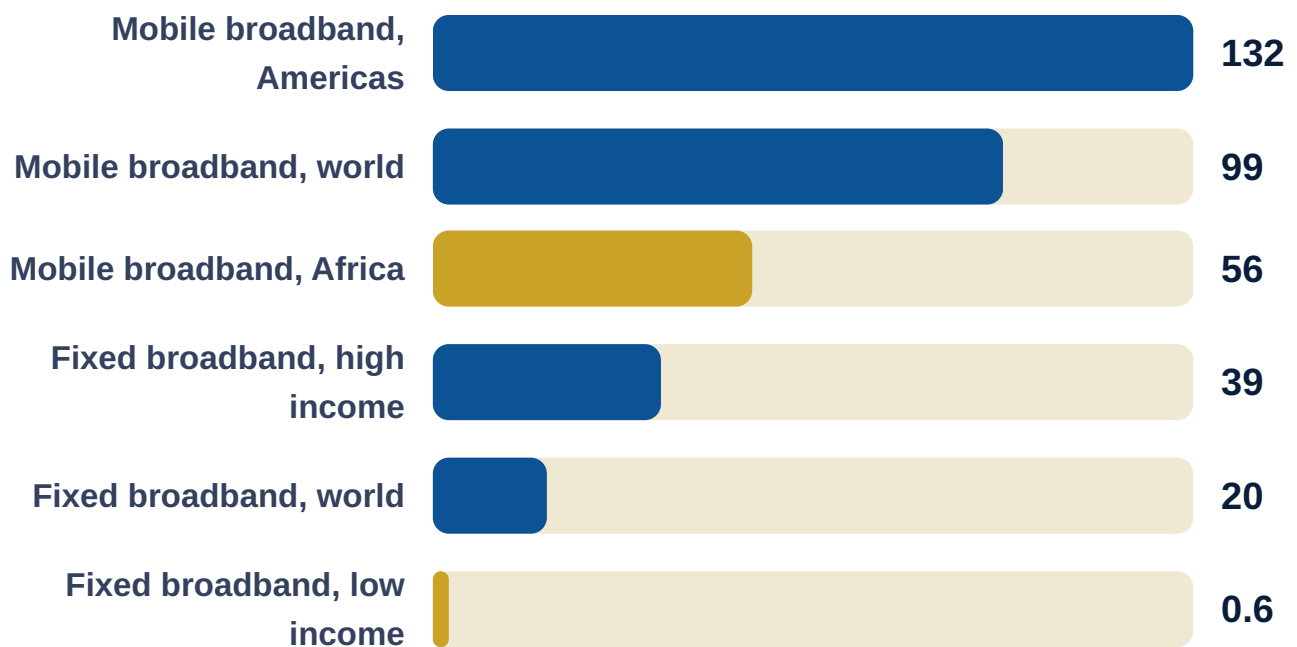
4.7B

people use mobile internet on
their own device

99

mobile broadband subscriptions
per 100 people worldwide

01 · THE INTERNET NOW



Subscriptions per 100 inhabitants. A low income country has about one fixed connection for every 65 in a high income country.

Two apps now hold 3 billion people each.

3B+

monthly users on WhatsApp, per
Meta's Q1 2025 earnings call

3B

monthly users on Instagram,
announced September 2025

6.75

different platforms used by the
average online adult each month

02 · ATTENTION



a day in TikTok per Android user,
the most of any social app

YouTube's total app time versus
TikTok's

a day in WhatsApp, opened 20+
times a day

Two giants tie at the top of monthly reach.



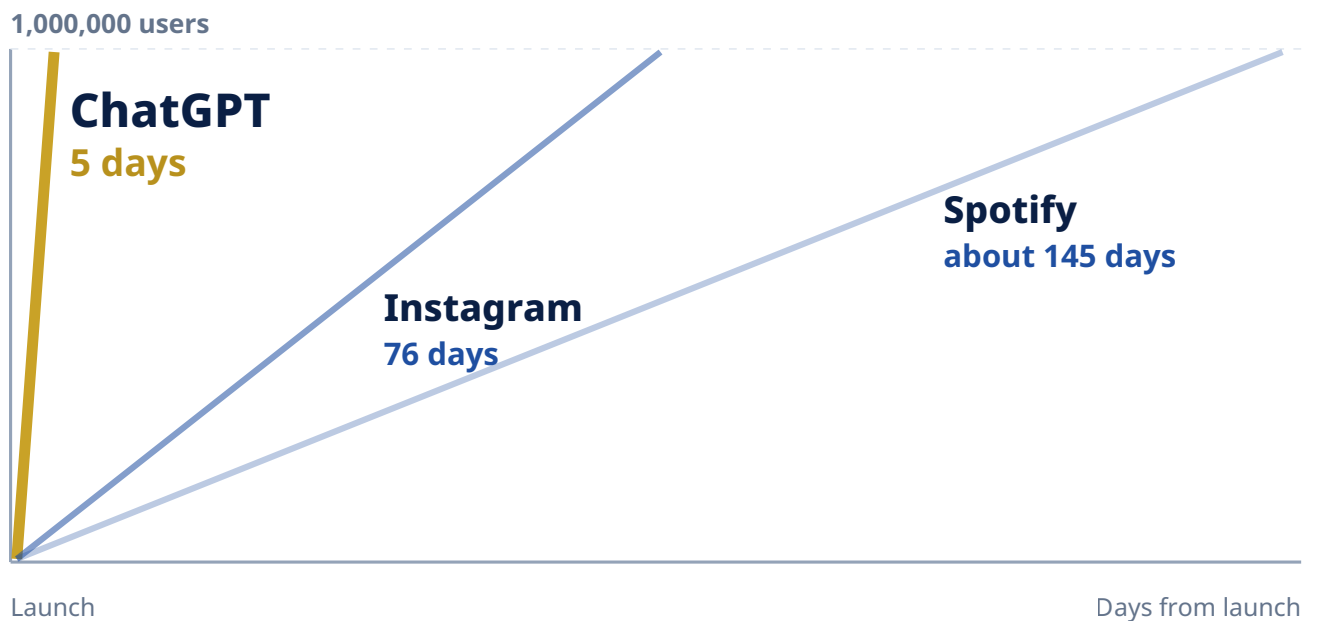
Share of online adults who used each in the previous month, by survey self-report.

02 · ATTENTION



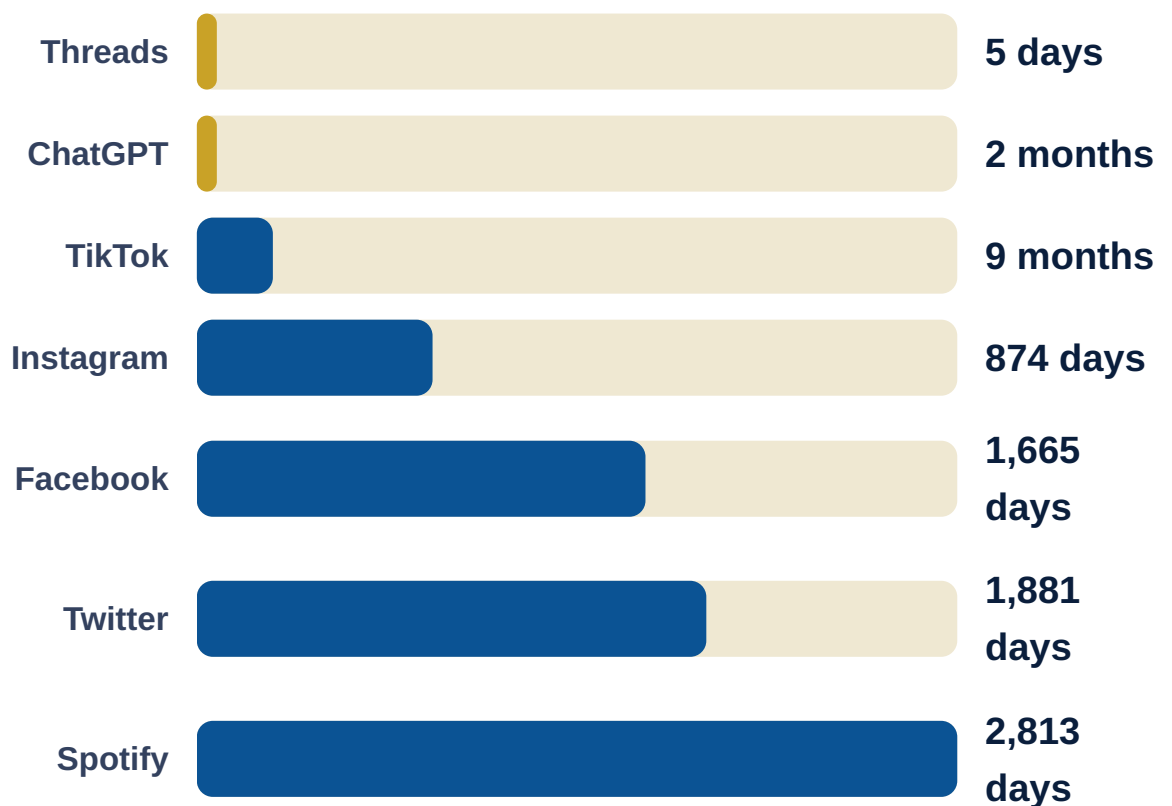
Americans age 12 and over. Monthly podcast reach is now a majority habit.

Five days.



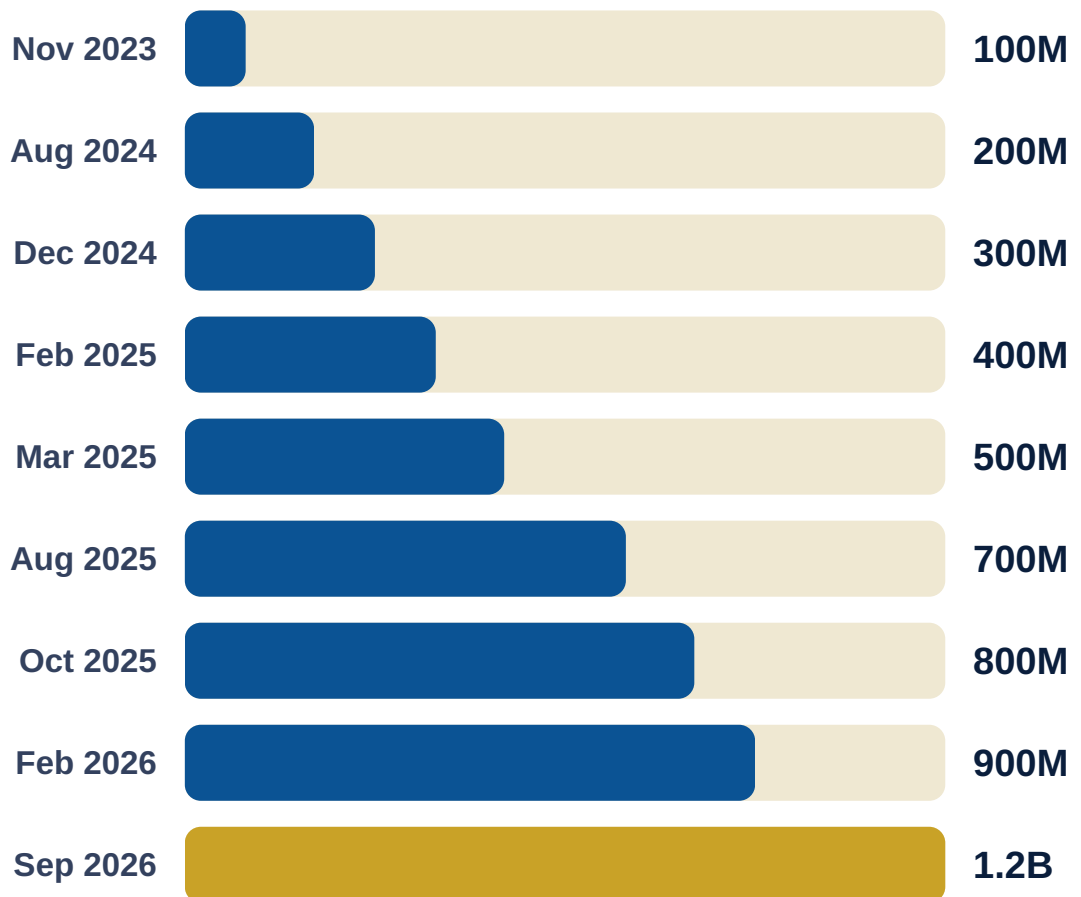
Each line ends the day that service crossed one million users. For scale: Facebook took about 10 months, Netflix about 3.4 years.

02 · THE RACE



Netflix needed about a decade on its streaming service. One correction the record forced on us: the popular roundup table's "Spotify, 55 months" is wrong against Spotify's own numbers. It took 92 months.

Then ChatGPT kept going.



Weekly users, each rung an OpenAI executive statement. The last rung is Sam Altman at DevDay, September 29, 2026, as reported; OpenAI has not published that figure on its own site, and we label it that way.



The honest caveat: Meta AI's number rides distribution. It was built into WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook, whose search bars it replaced in April 2025; the standalone app launched only on April 29, 2025, and Meta's own CFO described usage as led by WhatsApp. One billion monthly users "across its apps" is a different thing from a billion people choosing a new product, and the chart should not pretend otherwise.

03 · THE AI SHIFT

800M

people use ChatGPT every week, less than three years after launch.

03 · THE AI SHIFT



messages a week by July 2025

of the world's adults had adopted
ChatGPT

of messages come from users
under 26

Most ChatGPT use is not work. It is life.



Practical guidance, seeking information, writing. And growth is strongest in low and middle income countries.

03 · THE AI SHIFT



Using it is normal. Scaling it is rare.

88%

of organizations use AI in at least one function (McKinsey, 2025)

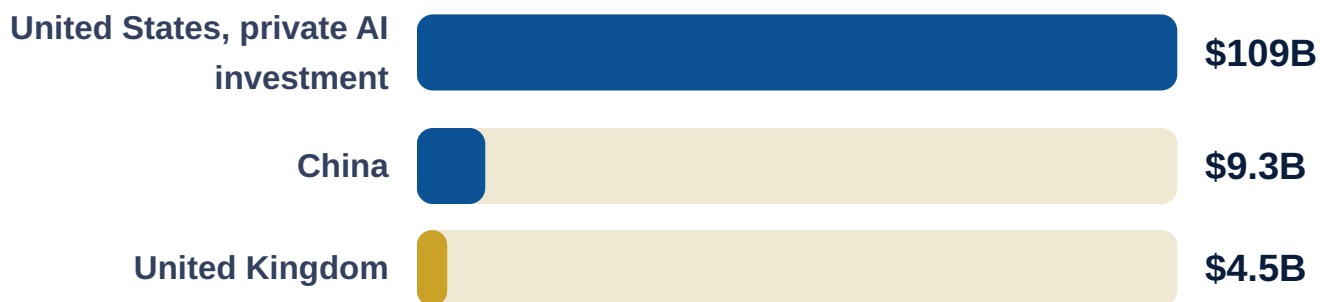
7%

have AI fully scaled across the organization

40%

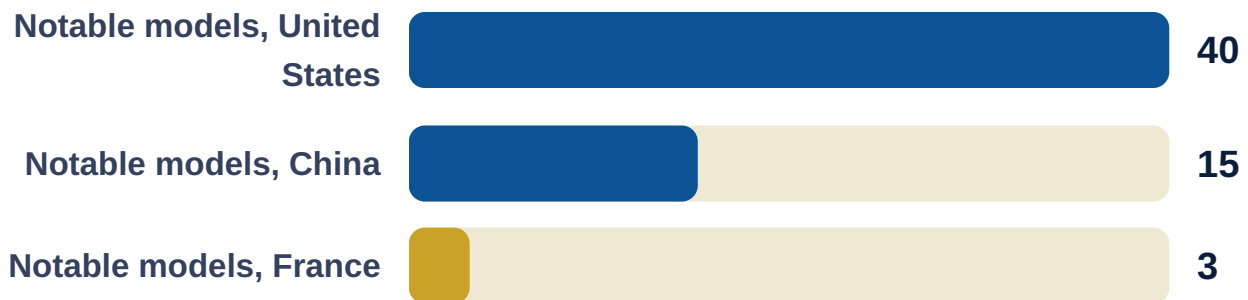
of U.S. employees use AI at work, up from 21 percent in 2023

03 · THE AI SHIFT



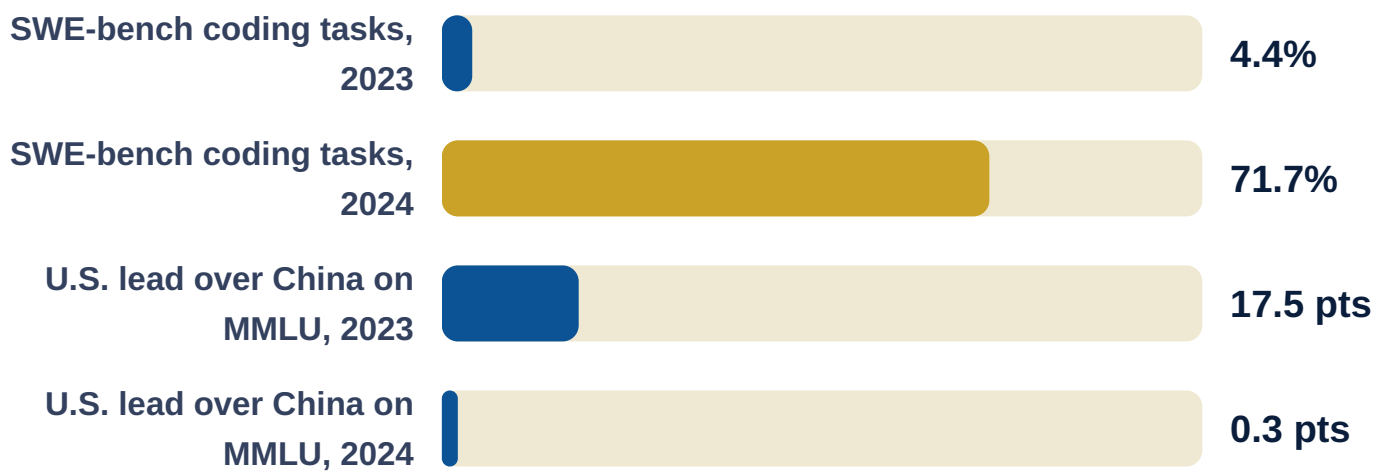
Global corporate AI investment hit a record \$252.3 billion in 2024.

Industry builds the frontier now.



Nearly 90 percent of notable models in 2024 came from industry, up from 60 percent in 2023.

03 · THE AI SHIFT



The price of intelligence fell 280 fold.



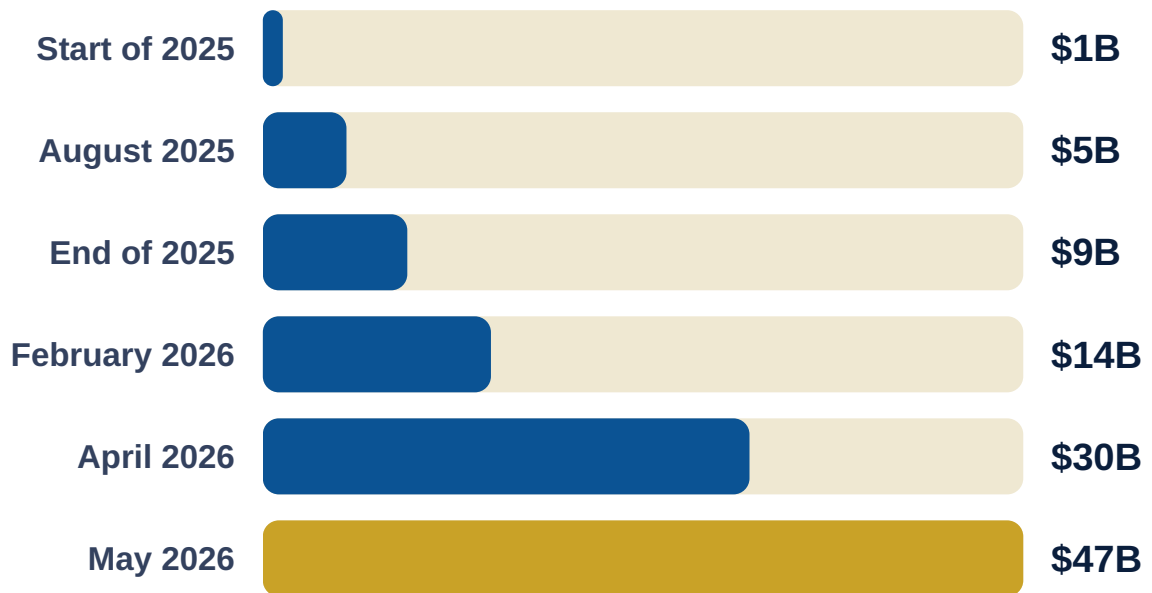
At GPT-3.5 level performance. When a capability gets 280 times cheaper in two years, it stops being a feature and becomes infrastructure.

03 · THE AI SHIFT



Pew tracked 68,879 real Google searches. Google's AI Overviews passed 2 billion monthly users by July 2025.

The second company is on a rocket of its own.



Anthropic's annualized revenue run rate, every rung stated by Anthropic itself in its own announcements. Reports since put it higher still (\$65 billion per Bloomberg, July 2026; \$100 billion per The New York Times, September 2026). Those are reported figures, not company statements, so they stay in this footnote.

03 · THE AI SHIFT



usage growth in Muse's first three months

of all public GitHub commits authored by Claude Code in February 2026 (SemiAnalysis estimate, cited by Anthropic)

Big customers multiplied eighty fold.



300,000+

business customers in total

8 of 10

of the Fortune 10 are Anthropic customers

Customers spending over one million dollars a year with Anthropic. One disclosure Anthropic has never made: a Claude user count. The circulating numbers are third party visit estimates, so they are not charted here.

AI is now an electricity story.

945 TWh

of electricity a year for data centres by 2030, more than double today, roughly Japan's entire electricity consumption. Demand from AI optimised centres more than quadruples.

Hyperscaler capex, 2022



\$156B

Hyperscaler capex, 2027
expected



\$1,000B+

NVIDIA data centre revenue in
fiscal 2025, up 142 percent

of U.S. electricity demand growth
to 2030 comes from data centres

Training runs are getting heavier, fast.



Tonnes of CO2 equivalent. Training compute doubles roughly every five months; hardware efficiency improves about 40 percent a year, and demand is winning.



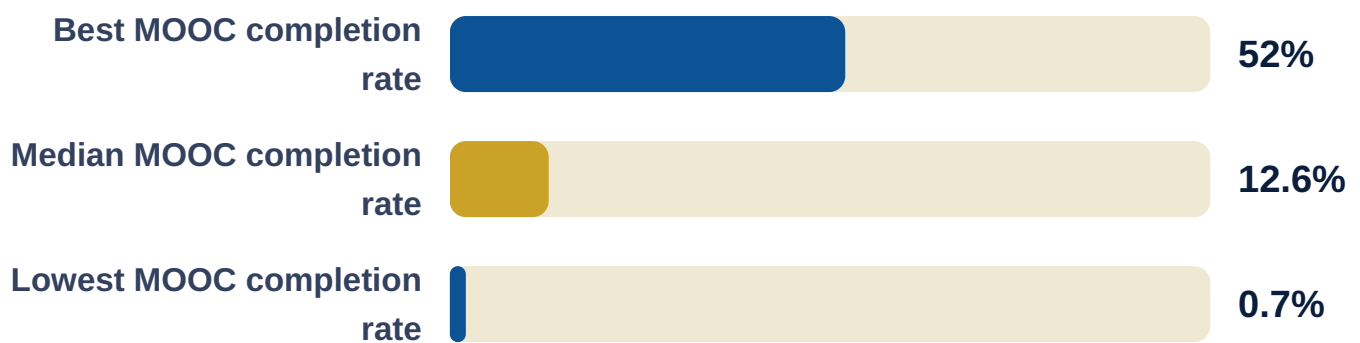
people pay for the app, up 37
percent in a year

of monthly users open it every
single day

**Online courses crossed into the
hundreds of millions.**

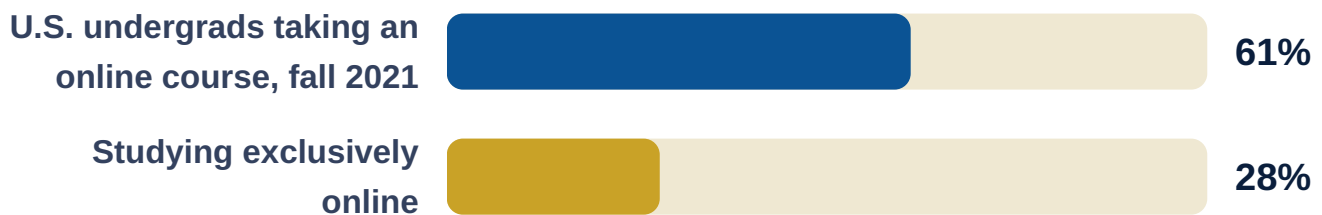
183M

registered learners on Coursera alone, adding 7.5 million in a single quarter. Its AI courses passed 10 million enrollments, arriving at 12 a minute. edX reports 100 million learners of its own.



Across 221 courses studied at Lancaster University. Reach is solved. Follow-through is the open problem in online learning, and it is the problem worth solving.

Online stayed mainstream after the emergency ended.



9.4 million undergraduates took at least one distance course in fall 2021, up from 36 percent taking any in 2019.



U.S. YouTube users, in Pew's last dedicated study of learning on the platform (2018). Stated plainly because the vintage matters: this remains the benchmark figure, and no newer equivalent study has replaced it.

Employers say two skills in five are about to change.

New jobs created by 2030



170M

Jobs displaced by 2030



92M

~40%

of job skills change by 2030

63%

of employers cite the skills gap as
the key barrier

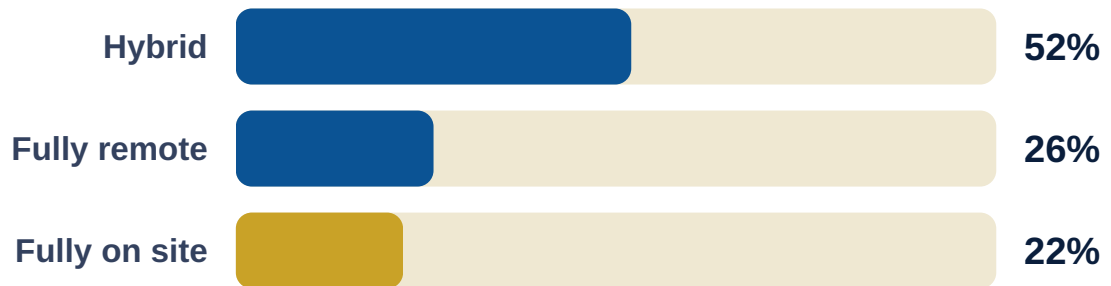
77%

of employers plan to upskill their
own workers



That second bar is over 120 million people at risk of redundancy. The fastest growing skills employers name: AI, big data, cybersecurity, and right beside them, analytical thinking and resilience.

Hybrid is the settlement, and it is holding.



27%

of paid U.S. workdays were
worked from home in June 2025

46%

of remote capable workers would
be unlikely to stay if remote work
ended

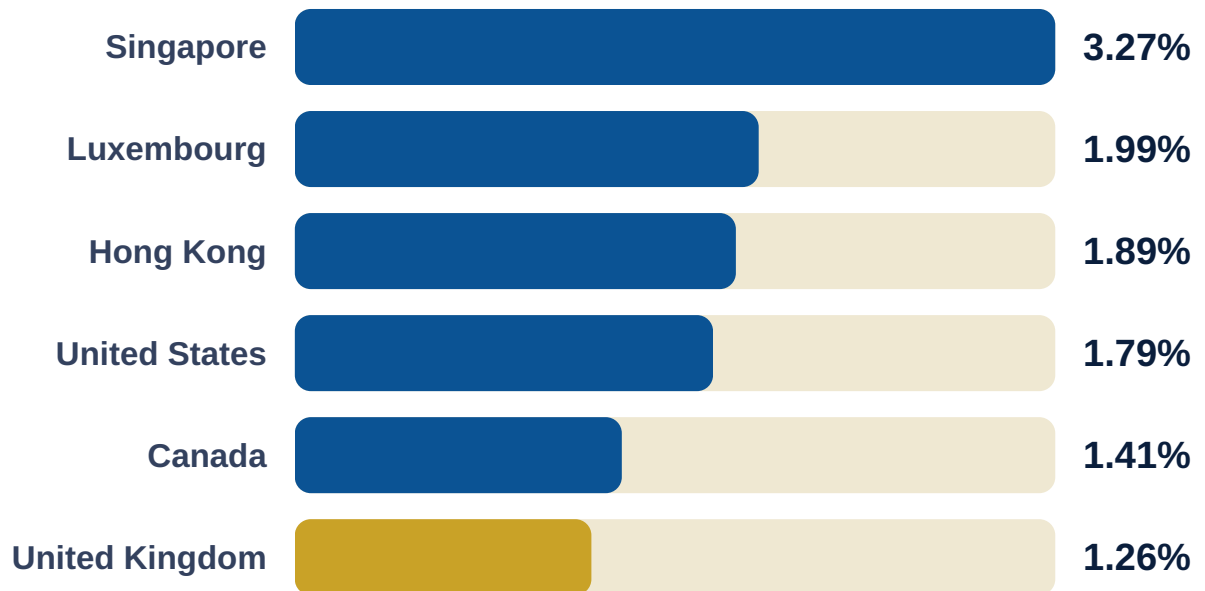


use it daily, still a small core

of company leaders expect to use
AI agents as digital team
members within 12 to 18 months

of leaders say agents already fully
automate some workflows

Where AI skills get hired, per job ad.



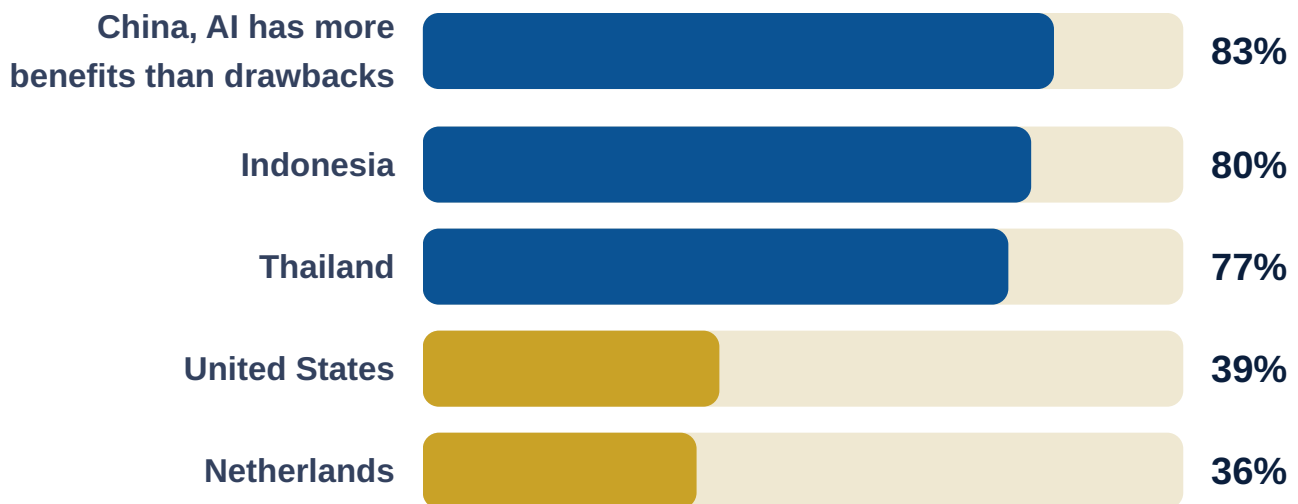
Share of 2024 job postings requiring AI skills. Generative AI as a named skill quadrupled its U.S. posting share in one year, 0.05 to 0.22 percent.



of skilled knowledge workers
freelanced in the past year

what AI clients spend versus the
average client on Upwork

The world's mood on AI splits by region.



Sixty percent of people worldwide expect AI to change their job within five years.
Optimism and adoption travel together.

\$6.4T

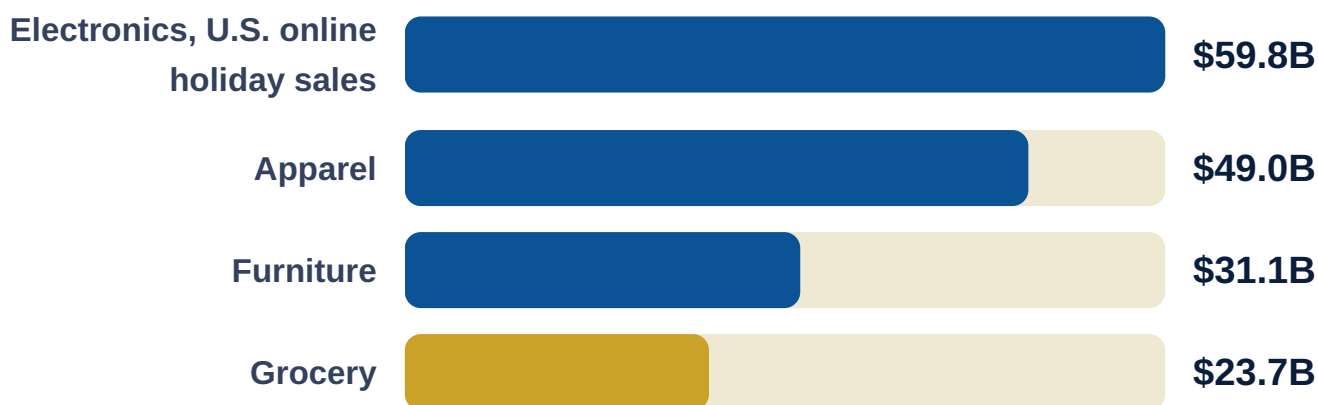
of retail e-commerce sales worldwide in 2025, 20.5 percent of all retail. No statistical agency publishes a global total; this is the standard forecast series, labeled as such.

07 · HOW THE WORLD BUYS



Online share of retail, each from its own official or standard source: ONS (UK, August 2026), National Bureau of Statistics (China, 2025), EMARKETER (world, 2025), U.S. Census Bureau (Q2 2026, \$340.2 billion).

The checkout moved to the phone, then to three aisles.



56.4%

of U.S. online holiday transactions
happened on a smartphone

66.5%

on Christmas Day itself



of adults in developing economies
made or received a digital
payment in 2024

of adults in those economies
bought something online

The ad money lives online now.



U.S. internet advertising revenue reached \$258.6 billion in 2024. Social was the fastest riser, up 36.7 percent.



paid by YouTube to creators,
artists and media companies in
three years

of U.S. online holiday revenue
arrived through affiliate and
influencer links

08 · THE OTHER 2.2 BILLION

2.2B

people are still offline: more than a quarter of the human race, untouched by every chart before this one.

08 · THE OTHER 2.2 BILLION



The usage gap is ten times the coverage gap. For most of the offline world, the barrier is no longer the network. It is cost, skills and relevance.

The same data costs 22 times more of a poor income.



22x

more of their income low income
subscribers pay than high income
ones

4 in 10

low and middle income economies
meet the 2 percent target on
either basket

08 · THE OTHER 2.2 BILLION



And 36 percent of mobile broadband subscriptions are already 5G, roughly 3 billion connections, almost none of them in the countries that need cheap data most.

Connected is not the same as connected well.



A smartphone in the highest use region moves more than seven times the monthly data of one in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The next classroom is a phone

Learning's giants are phone apps and video platforms, in exactly the markets where incomes are lowest. Whoever teaches well on a cheap phone, in the local language, owns the future of education.

AI is becoming a life tool first

Three quarters of ChatGPT messages are non-work now. Adoption is compounding in the developing world. The winning products will be the most useful and the most open.

Follow-through is the open frontier

Reach is solved; completion is not: a 12.6 percent median MOOC finish rate, 88 percent of firms using AI but 7 percent scaling it. The value of this decade goes to whoever closes the gap between access and outcome.

Every source used in this report

Connectivity and attention. [ITU, Facts and Figures 2025](#) (internet use, subscriptions, affordability, coverage) · [DataReportal, Digital 2026](#) and [Digital 2025](#) (GWI, Similarweb) · [GSMA, State of Mobile Internet Connectivity 2025](#) · [StatCounter](#) · [Ericsson Mobility Report](#) · [Edison Research, Infinite Dial 2025](#)

AI and compute. [Stanford AI Index Report 2025](#) · [OpenAI and Harvard, How People Use ChatGPT](#) · [McKinsey, The State of AI 2025](#) · [IEA, Energy and AI](#) · [J.P. Morgan Asset Management](#) · [NVIDIA fiscal 2025 results](#) · [Pew, AI summaries browsing study](#) · [Alphabet Q2 2025 remarks](#) · [OpenAI DevDay, October 2025](#)

Learning and work. [Duolingo Q2 2025 letter \(SEC\)](#) · [Coursera Q2 2025 letter](#) · [edX](#) · [Jordan MOOC research](#) · [NCES FastFacts](#) · [Pew, YouTube learning 2018](#) · [WEF, Future of Jobs 2025](#) · [Gallup](#) · [Microsoft Work Trend Index 2025](#) · [WFH Research](#) · [Upwork](#)

Commerce and creators. [EMARKETER](#) · [U.S. Census Bureau](#) · [ONS](#) · [NBS China](#) · [World Bank, Global Findex 2025](#) · [Adobe holiday report](#) · [IAB](#) · [IAB creator study](#) · [Google, YouTube payouts, 2024](#)

The race and Anthropic. [Altman, December 2022 \(1M post\)](#) · [Instagram milestone list](#) · [Spotify via Music Ally, 2009](#) · [UBS study via Reuters, 2023](#) · [Threads 100M, 2023](#) · [Meta AI 1B claim, May 2025](#) · [Anthropic Series F, G, H announcements](#) · [Anthropic, Muse \\$1B](#) · [Anthropic Economic Index](#)

Method. Public sources only; no private data was bought and no figure was estimated by us. Each slide's footnote names its source and vintage. Where sources measure the same thing differently (the ITU and DataReportal count internet users differently, for example), the report keeps them in separate slides and never blends them.

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