The Anointment Effect: How a Questionable “MIT Study” Became Gospel

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Have you heard? 95% of corporate AI investments are failing! A few months ago, this claim ricocheted from newsrooms to boardrooms, appearing in *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *Harvard Business Review*, and many more media outlets.

The source? An "MIT study” revealing the reality behind the AI hype.

Except MIT doesn't conduct studies. Universities aren’t monolithic research entities and they rarely produce white papers. This particular study was written neither by MIT nor an MIT faculty research group with scientific intent. It was “produced in collaboration with Project NANDA out of MIT”. Its finding are based on a convenience sample of interviews with unspecified respondents and it self-describes one key figure as "directionally accurate." Yet once this research had been anointed with the MIT brand, skepticism evaporated. Through repetition in prominent media outlets, the headline *95%* failed number assumed the status of fact.

The near instant conversion from questionable research to accepted wisdom reveals a deeply troubling feature of how information propagates in the current moment. And when AI can generate infinite variations of plausible-sounding research, the problem is about to get exponentially worse.

The Mechanics of Anointment

This is in part a story about status dynamics. MIT is one of the world’s great research institutions. In this case, the MIT affiliation certified the veracity of the research. Anointment operates through a specific mechanism: prestigious associations bypass our skepticism filters. They’re a fast track to legitimacy. The *Fortune* headline that reads, “MIT Report: 95% … Failing.” borrows the university’s institutional authority. The next outlet then cites *Fortune’s* coverage, alongside MIT’s brand. When a few more admired media outlets join in, credibility becomes a *fait accompli*. Each repetition strengthens the claim, leading to its status as a "social fact"—something that becomes true in its consequences regardless of its actual validity.

I make this point in my recent book (*Anointed*!) Anointment is especially powerful today because the scale and scope of information means we *must* rely on institutional authority. There are too many claims about too many things to verify each one. Even as a career academic with an AI-focused research agenda, it took me an hour to track down and evaluate the “MIT” report. So we reach for shortcuts: the source’s reputation, the author’s credentials, the institution’s prestige. When something comes to us the MIT imprimatur, we assume it has passed the rigors of peer review.

In this case, it hadn’t.

Journalists as Amplifiers; Not Investigators

The media's role deserves scrutiny. To my knowledge, no major outlet seriously questioned the "95% failure" headline. I saw no reporting on how the 52 organizations featured in the study were selected, why interviewees could speak on behalf large enterprises, what counted as "failure," or how anyone proposed to measure ROI for a general-purpose technology still in its infancy. Yet journalists, racing to be first with a viral story that reflects a recent groundswell of AI skepticism, accepted the headline claim at face value. The MIT logo was catnip. It offered legitimacy, click-ability, and a resonant narrative.

This is alarming because of the times. The study in question is real and I'm sure its authors had no malintent in sharing it. But as our recent article in *Science Magazine* suggests, AI can generate unlimited research-like artifacts, replete with convincing methodologies and sophisticated-seeming statistical analysis. We've been headed in this direction for a long time, but the infrastructure for an information catastrophe is truly in place. We've built technology to manufacture "research," and we've fine-tuned global media platforms to amplify it.

Is There a Fix?

Breaking this cycle requires recognizing that in an age of infinite content generation, traditional journalism—questioning sources, requiring data, understanding methodology—is existentially important. The more prestigious the source, the bolder the claim, the more it confirms the priors of a vocal minority, the *more* we should question it. That runs counter to habits formed when newsroom budgets have come under strain, and in an era when institutional labels reliably signaled quality. When the authority to legitimate can be misrepresented or fabricated, blind deference in the media is a societal risk.

We're at a fork. Down one path, the anointment effect causes claims in a prestige wrapper to reach escape velocity. Down the other, we verify first. Then we amplify. We figure out how to place real value on those who arrive second with accuracy rather than first with … whatever.

Let's all try to do what the media outlets should have done: if it's germane to us, let's look over a study's methodology, understand authors' affiliations more precisely, and interrogate the conclusions. And if that seems like too much work, just ask Gemini to do it! The robot is normally outstanding at identifying flaws in research when you request it to do so. The technology to manufacture reality came into its own this past year, so healthy skepticism is a survival (and civic) skill that's in too short supply.