

Weekly Progress Roundup

Trump lifts ban on supersonic flight, wolves multiply in California, cancer researchers present hopeful trial data, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN
JUN 08, 2025

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Economics & Development

- The share of Jamaica’s population living under its national poverty line fell to **8.2 percent** in 2023, the lowest ever recorded.
- Bhutan saw similar progress, according to a recent World Bank report, with its national poverty rate falling from **28 percent to 11.6 percent** between 2017 and 2022.
- The government of Georgia reported a **2.4 percentage point** drop in its national poverty rate in 2024 alone.
- A new multidimensional estimate in Morocco, based on indicators of education, health, housing, and access to basic infrastructure, found that **the share of Moroccans living in poverty fell from 11.9 percent in 2014 to 6.8 percent in 2024**.

Energy & Environment

Conservation and biodiversity

- Three new **wolf packs** have formed in California, bringing the total number of documented packs to ten. Ten years ago, there was just one known pack—the first since wolves were extirpated from California in 1924.
- Golden eagles have been spotted **looking for nesting sites** in Northern England, a hopeful step toward recolonization after the birds disappeared from the area in 2015.
- A rare species of rabbit—last seen in 1904—was **caught on camera** in Mexico, proving that it has not, in fact, gone extinct.

Energy Production

- Meta has entered a **20-year agreement** to procure energy from an Illinois nuclear power plant. The deal will keep the plant in operation after a subsidy expires in 2027 and expand its capacity by 30 MW.

Food & Hunger

- The Pan American Health Organization has determined that **Bolivia and Brazil are free of foot-and-mouth disease**, a highly contagious virus that primarily affects even-toed ungulates like cattle, pigs, sheep, and goats.
- Researchers have developed new rice varieties that are resistant to **drought and heat**—possibly useful for mitigating some of the consequences of climate change.
- India has launched a **new high-resolution weather model** aimed at improving forecasts for agriculture and flood management.

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Health & Demographics

- An **AI-designed drug** passed a phase II trial for the first time after safely improving lung function in people with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, a chronic and incurable lung disease.
- Japanese scientists have begun **clinical trials for artificial blood** that could help end shortages in emergency medicine. Made from hemoglobin extracted from expired donor blood and encased in protective shells, the synthetic blood is compatible with all blood types and can be stored at room temperature for up to two years.
- The cancer survival rate in the UK has **doubled** since the 1970s when just 24 percent of cancer patients were still alive ten years after their diagnosis. Today, around half survive that long.
- Researchers presented a **bounty of hopeful cancer treatment results** at last week’s American Society of Clinical Oncology conference:
 - An **immunotherapy** developed by Legend Biotech **wiped out an “incurable” blood cancer in a third of trial participants**—and kept it from returning for at least five years.
 - A **new pill from AstraZeneca**, when taken after breast cancer began to develop resistance to standard hormone therapies, **lowered the risk of cancer progression or death by half**.
 - **When head and neck cancer patients received Keytruda**, a widely used immunotherapy, before the standard treatment (surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy), **they stayed progression-free for twice as long** as those who received the standard treatment alone.
 - **CAR T-cell therapy—another type of immunotherapy—helped people with advanced stomach and esophageal cancers live 40 percent longer** than those receiving standard treatments. CAR T-cell therapy is already known to be effective against blood cancers, but this was the **first time it showed success treating solid tumors** in a randomized trial. In another small, preliminary trial, **CAR T-cell therapy also shrank tumors in 8 of 13 participants with recurrent glioblastoma**, a highly aggressive and often fatal brain cancer.

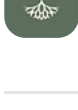
Politics & Freedom

- President Trump has instructed the Federal Aviation Administration to **lift the ban on overland supersonic flight**.

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Selected essays

Jason Crawford recounts the history of Malthusian prophecies—and why they repeatedly failed to predict reality.


 The Roots of Progress

The Problem-Solving Animal, part 1
Previously: The Flywheel, part 1 and part 2...

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5 days ago · 34 likes · 7 comments · Jason Crawford

Brian Potter finds that multiple inventors frequently arrive at the same breakthrough at around the same time.


 Construction Physics

How Common is Multiple Invention?
When Alexander Graham Bell filed a patent for the telephone on February 14th, 1876, he beat competing telephone developer Elisha Gray to the patent office by just a few hours. The resulting legal dispute between Bell Telephone and Western Union (which owned the rights to Gray...

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3 days ago · 86 likes · 21 comments · Brian Potter

Cremieux Recueil questions claims about an early-onset cancer epidemic.

 Cremieux Recueil

Early-Onset Cancer Fast Facts
This was a timed post. The way these work is that if it takes me more than two hours to complete the post, an applet that I made deletes everything I've written so far and I abandon the post. You can find my previous timed post here...

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3 days ago · 32 likes · 4 comments · Cremieux

We're Living in a Split-Screen America

The evolution from broadcast news to personalized feeds has fractured how we see the world, but progress is possible.

DYLAN TWEED
JUN 06, 2025

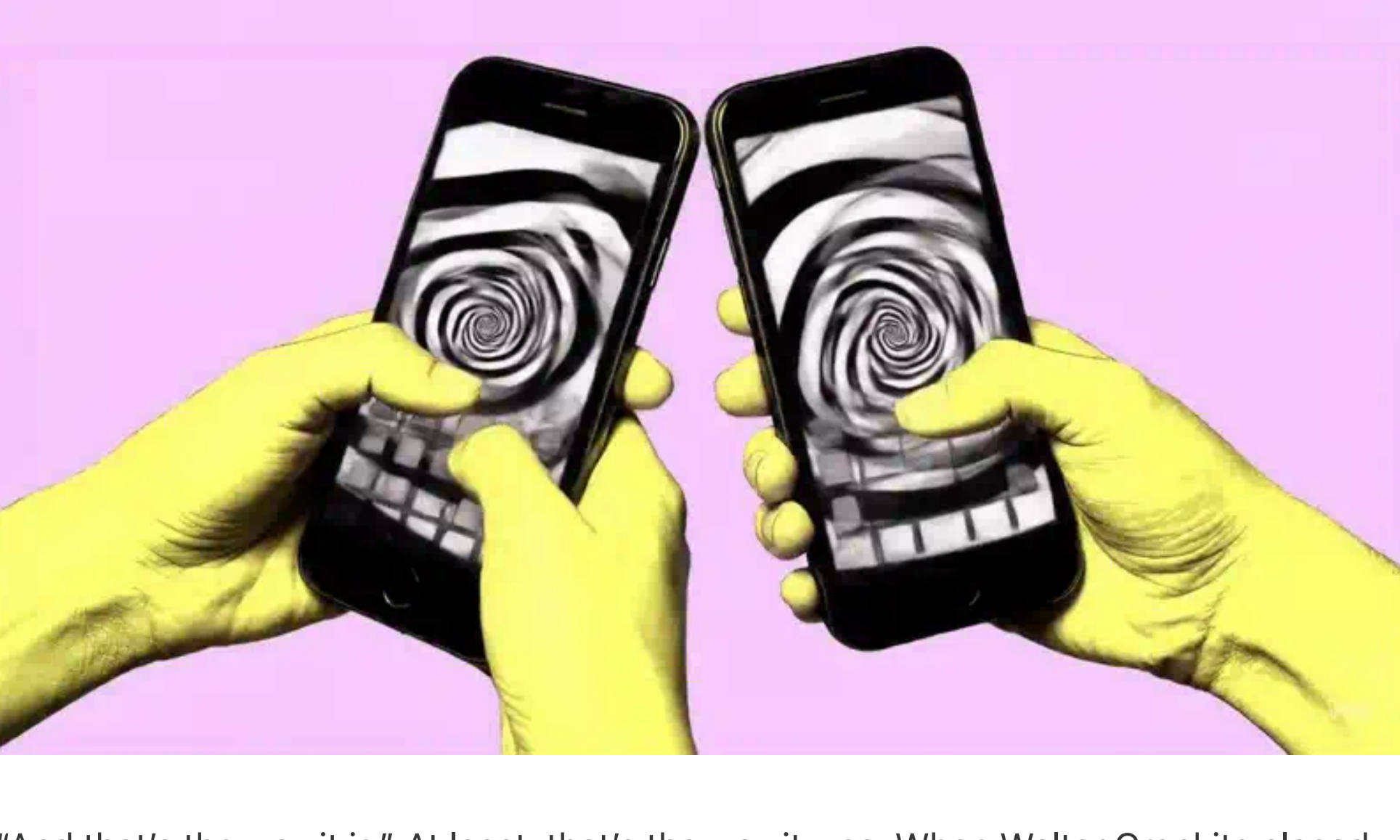
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“And that’s the way it is.” At least, that’s the way it was. When Walter Cronkite closed his nightly broadcasts with those words, America was a foreign country. At the height of broadcast news, Americans had differences of opinion but agreed on a basic set of facts about what was going on in the country and the world. Anchors like Cronkite, voted in 1972 by Democrats and Republicans alike as the most trusted man in America, aimed to be impartial and to win bipartisan credibility. But as partisan cable news and talk radio came to prominence in the 1990s, basic agreement on the facts began to erode. And with the rise of social media, it splintered entirely.

Platforms like [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#), [TikTok](#), and [Twitter](#) personalize content to maximize engagement (time spent on an app, posts liked and shared), showing you what you want to see. That reinforces users’ existing beliefs and limits exposure to opposing views. Strikingly, a Meta-commissioned study of 208 million users during the 2020 U.S. election cycle showed that liberals and conservatives on Facebook encountered almost entirely non-overlapping news sources. Once a social media user spends time looking at political content on one of these platforms, he or she is fed more and more of the same. Far from the broadcasts of the mid-century, modern news is delivered via increasingly bespoke “narrowcast.”

This political siloing is not trivial. Americans now inhabit split-screen realities. In one 2023 Gallup [poll](#), 90 percent of Republicans believed crime was rising, while 60 percent of Democrats believed it was falling. On climate change, a 2021 [survey](#) showed a 56-point partisan gap in beliefs about whether humans have an serious impact on the climate system (compared to a 16-point gap in 2001). In 2024, [44 percent of Democrats](#) rated the national economy as “excellent or good,” compared to only 13 percent of Republicans, despite the same underlying economic conditions. The gap wasn’t driven by personal finances, but by partisan interpretations of identical economic indicators. These are not differences of opinion; they are incommensurable beliefs about the state of the world.

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But platforms don’t just feed us headlines that align with our politics. They also bait our strongest emotions. In 2017, Facebook began weighting “angry” reactions five times more heavily than “likes” when floating posts to the top of our feeds. That same year, a [study](#) found that each additional moral-emotional word in a tweet (think “shameful,” “detestable,” “evil”) significantly increased the likelihood of it being shared and reshared.

This platform design calls up ancient instincts. Humans evolved to detect threats to the coalition, to signal our group loyalty, and to rally allies against rivals. A tweet calling someone “abhorrent” isn’t just an opinion; it’s a tribal call to action. And because these platforms so reliably elicit our ire and impel us to spread it to others, they’ve become outrage engines.

They create sealed chambers that echo our anger, where contrary evidence is unlikely to penetrate. Carl Sagan now sounds prescient when we warned in 1995 of a future where Americans, embedded in an information economy, would become “unable to distinguish between what feels good and what’s true,” leaving society vulnerable to illusion and manipulation.

And the consequences of the outrage engines don’t stop at our borders. In 2016, Russian operatives used fake personas on Facebook and Twitter to spread inflammatory memes targeting both liberals and conservatives. They didn’t need to hack anything. They simply exploited an information ecosystem already optimized for spreading partisan outrage.

What can be done? There is no single fix, but meaningful improvements are possible.

In a randomized [study](#), older adults who received just one hour of digital literacy training from MediaWise improved their ability to tell false headlines from real ones by 21 percentage points. When [Twitter added a prompt](#) asking users if they wanted to read an article before retweeting it, people were 40 percent more likely to click through to the article before sharing it impulsively.

Choice helps too. In one [study](#), switching users from a feed that had been personalized by the algorithm to one that showed posts in chronological order measurably increased their exposure to content across the political aisle. While it [may not be a silver bullet](#), giving users the ability to choose their feed structure, including which algorithm to use, allows for opportunities to be exposed to contrary opinions and to peer outside the echo chamber.

But deeper change is cultural. A [compelling case](#) has been made that human reasoning evolved not to uncover objective truth, but to persuade others, to justify our own ideas, and to win arguments. That is why the habits of sound reasoning must be cultivated through norms that prize truth over tribal loyalty, deliberation over impulsivity, and the ability to make the best case for opposing views in order to oppose them on their merits.

This isn’t a call for censorship or government control of the news, nor is it a plea to go back to three-network broadcasting. The democratization of media has brought real benefits, including broader participation in public discourse and greater scrutiny of powerful institutions. But it has also made public life more combustible and has manufactured disagreements about factual questions. In a competition for attention, platforms are designed to maximize time spent on them. That means elevating content that provokes strong emotional responses, especially outrage, and targeting it toward the users most likely to react. The more incendiary the content, the more likely it is to hold us captivated.

What we are witnessing is not a failure of the market, but a particularly efficient version of it, albeit one that optimizes for attention, not accuracy. Personalized feeds, algorithmic curation, and viral content are giving people more of what they want. And yet, many Americans say they are dissatisfied with the result. In a 2023 Pew [survey](#), 86 percent of U.S. adults said they believe Democrats and Republicans are more focused on fighting each other than solving real problems, and respondents across party lines cited political polarization as the biggest problem with the political system.

While online outrage bubbles may not qualify as a market failure in the technical sense, they are clearly a civic problem worth confronting. An information ecosystem optimized for attention rather than accuracy will reliably amplify division and distrust, even while giving users more of what they like to see and share. The incentives are working as designed, but the outcome is a fragmented public unable to agree on the real state of the world. If democracy depends on a shared understanding of basic facts of the matter, then reckoning with these tradeoffs is well worth our much-demanded attention.

Author: Dylan Tweed, an Institute Fellow and PhD Candidate in Cognition, Brain, and Behavior at Harvard University.

The Declining Time Price of Kilowatt-Hours

We're getting more energy for less time.

GALE POOLEY
JUN 03, 2025

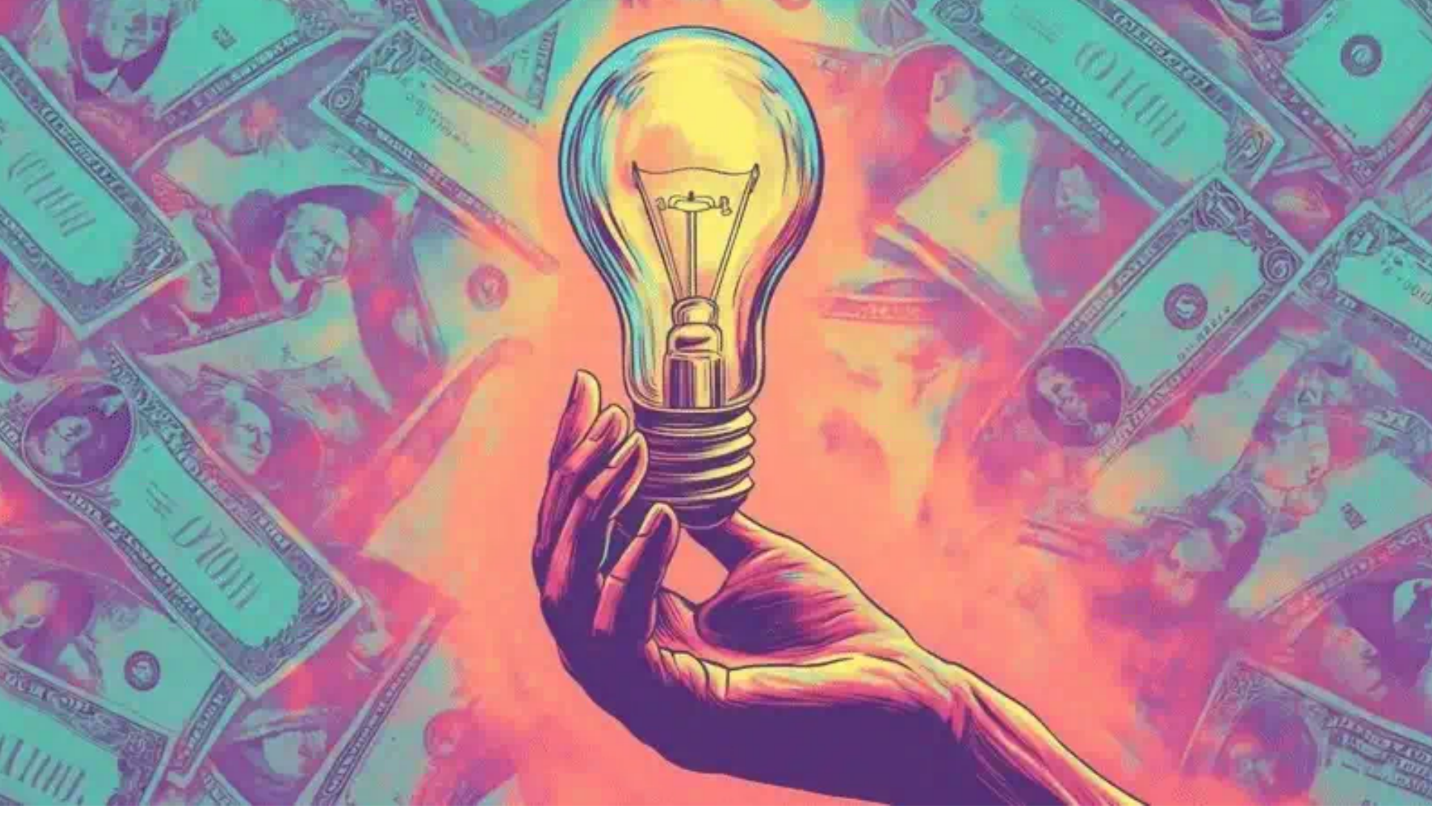
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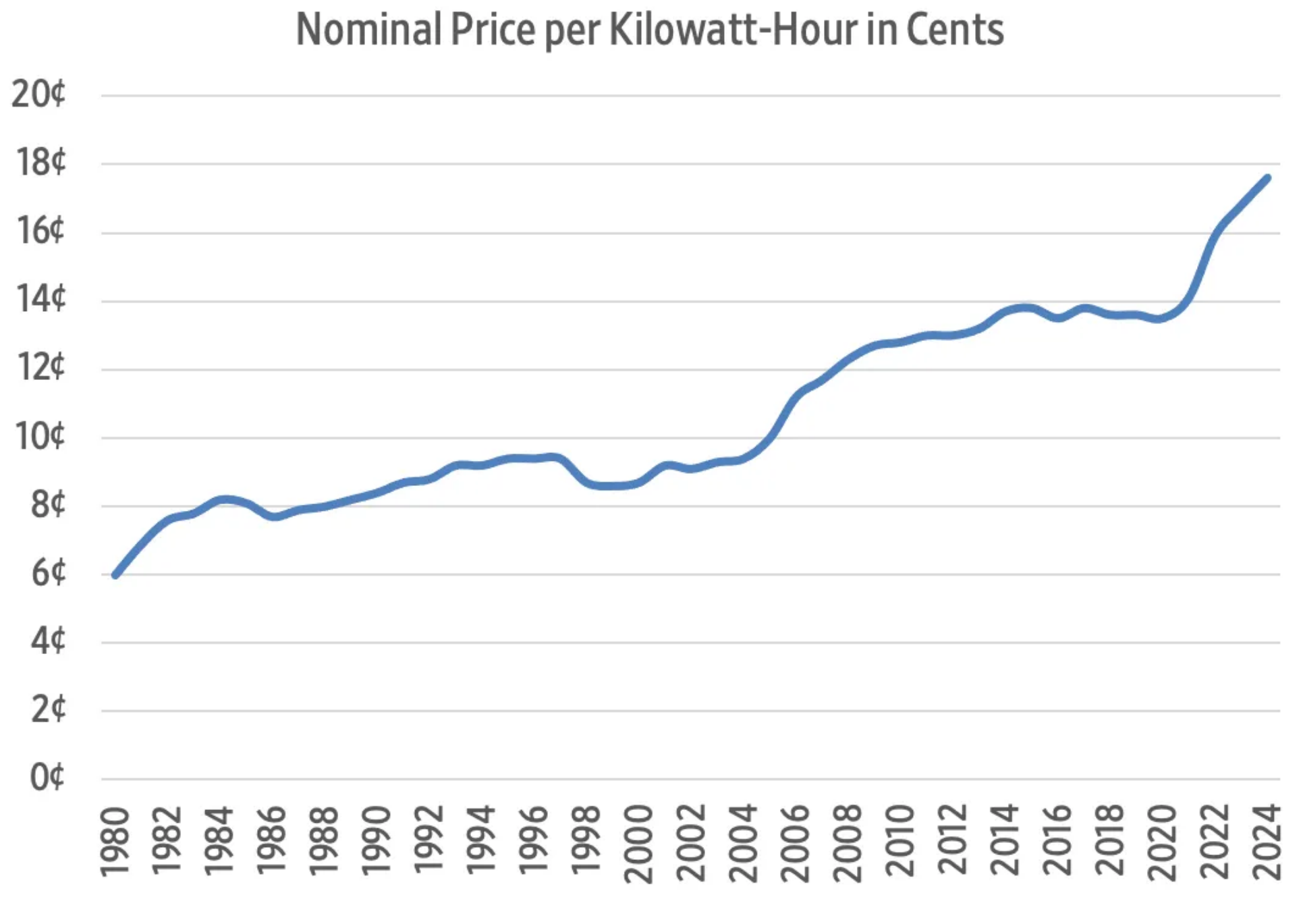
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Energy is essential to creating abundance. Whether it’s used to organize and move atoms or to store and transmit information, economic development depends on energy. Although energy is available in many forms and measured in various units, the kilowatt-hour (kWh) is a common standard of comparison, especially in electricity-related contexts. A kWh represents the energy delivered by one kilowatt of power sustained over one hour. For perspective, a standard 42-gallon barrel of crude oil contains approximately 1,700 kWh of energy, though the exact amount depends on the oil’s grade.

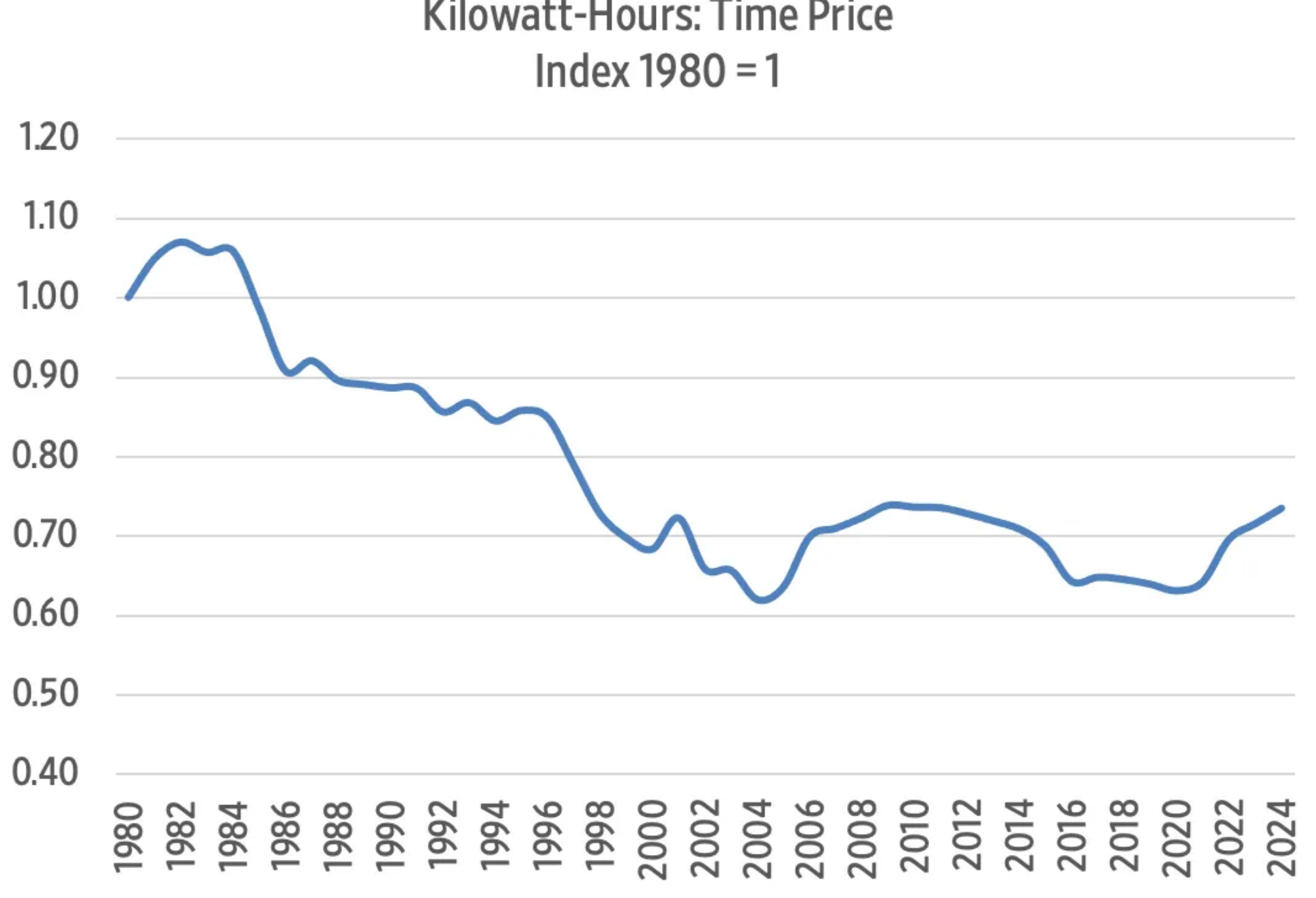
The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) [tracks](#) average electricity prices over time in nominal terms. The chart below shows the U.S. average price per kWh from 1980 to the present—rising from about 6 cents per kWh in 1980 to 17.6 cents today.



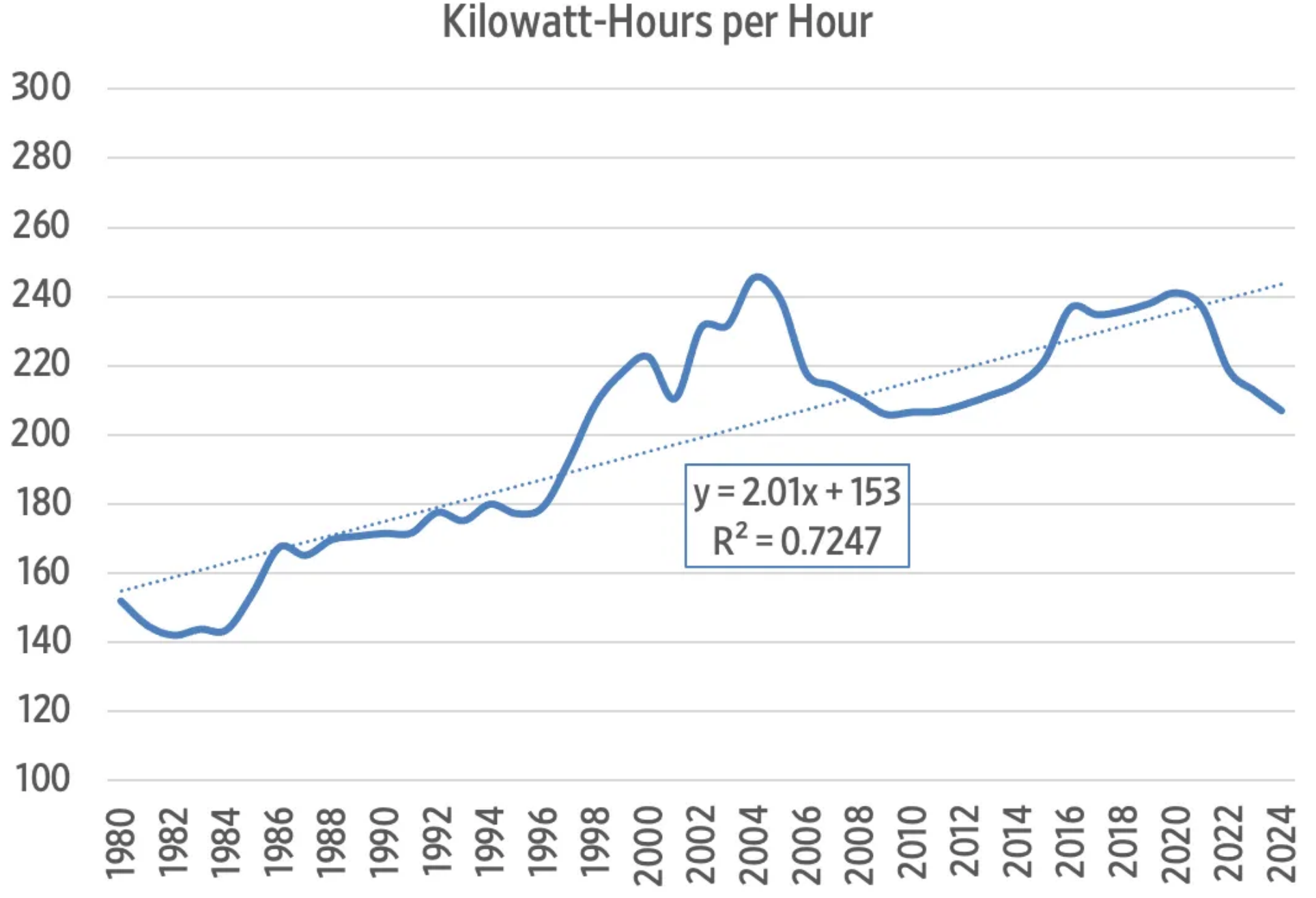
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To convert the money price into a time price, we compared the US blue-collar hourly compensation rate for each year, indexing 1980 as the baseline (1.0). The result shows that the time required to purchase a kWh of electricity has declined by 26.6 percent since 1980.



Another way to understand electricity prices is to ask: how many kWh can you buy with one hour of work? This chart illustrates that relationship. In 1980, an hour of US blue-collar labor could buy 152 kWh; today, it buys 207 kWh—a 36 percent increase in energy abundance.



The regression line plotted on the chart suggests a steady gain of about two additional kWh per year for the same amount of work. Although time prices have spiked in the past three years, the long-term trend still indicates growing abundance..

If you started your first job as an unskilled worker in 1980 and “upskilled” to a blue-collar job by 2024, your time price for electricity would have dropped by 67.3 percent. For the time it took to earn enough to buy 100 kWh in 1980, you could now purchase 306 kWh—representing a 206 percent increase in electricity abundance.