



Dear Publishing Professional,

I've discussed the topic in this issue before, but some readers have asked me to have a more comprehensive go at it, with more specifics about the technology and - most especially - what to do to prepare.

Opportunities and perils in the coming content earthquake: the shape of things to come

The future of publishing and content consumption will belong to AI agents. The consumer / reader won't go out into the digital world to find content, but will have a personalized agent that seeks, curates, transforms, and compiles the content for him. It will be somewhat like the news feed I get when I swipe left on my phone, but more personalized and more comprehensive.

To get the idea, imagine coming home from work and saying, "Hey Siri, entertain me," and it's able to find exactly the music, audio, video, text, joke, or game that scratches you where you itch.

Contrast that with what a consumer does now on any given day.

- Go to websites
- Go to YouTube
- Open X, Facebook, LinkedIn
- Open a a podcast app
- Go to a TV channel
- Read a news feed
- Open Kindle

Switching between platforms and services like this is frustrating and not very efficient.

Also, despite having all these options and resources, consumers still aren't sure they're finding everything that interests them. Maybe there's a Substack of interest, a video on an obscure platform, or an article written in a language the reader doesn't know.

Soon, consumers won't do any of the things I listed above. **Readers won't "go" to get content. An AI-powered app will collect everything the reader wants, transform it into the format he wants, and deliver it to him.** (Yes, I said "he." Read the PS.) The reader might like an article converted to audio, or translated from German. He might want summaries, bullet points, infographics. He might want two sources combined into one, or a point / counterpoint discussion of an issue. He might want to know how his favorite expert would reply to a video.

An AI agent tuned to the reader's preferences will reduce "doom scrolling" and increase the amount of time spent on content he loves.

Right now, the consumer needs to know what's out there, or he has to have a discovery tool like a search engine to find it. In the future he won't have to do that. AI will go find things for him. The reader has some control over this discovery process, but he's only able to dip his toe into the ocean of available options. As a simple example, he probably can't read French websites.

AI is already able to do most of the things I've outlined here. It's only a matter of time before these capabilities are combined into a single service customized to the individual.

Who will build this wonder?

Ideally this service would be created by someone who has the consumer's best interests at heart. That won't happen. Saints don't build AI tools. A second-best option would be a service designed with the interests of content creators in mind. That won't happen either, because content creators can't agree among themselves on what to do or how to do it.

The company that creates this thunderbolt will be following the same "surveillance capitalism" model the tech giants have pursued so far. It will have an understanding of user preferences and behavior that transcends the already scary data the tech giants have on us now. It will be able to create personalized offers at precisely the right time, in the right voice, exactly when the user is most likely to buy.

For example, I love lots of different styles of music, and different songs will appeal to me at different times, based on who knows what. My AI agent will learn – as it gets my feedback – that I prefer Nora Jones when I'm cooking dinner, intellectual podcasts when I'm mowing the lawn, and Jethro Tull when I'm in the car by myself. (My wife is not a fan.) It will also know which ads to slip in between which songs.

If we're lucky, these AI agents will focus on selling us things rather than convincing us of things. A future where this technology is controlled by a one-party state or a Bond Villain is an ugly idea to contemplate. I don't know who can save us from that possibility. Certainly not Congress.

Implications, opportunities, and threats

This new ecosystem will fundamentally transform the information / content industry. Here are a few of the likely changes.

Websites and branded apps will decline as the primary front door for content. The reader won't visit your site. He'll trust his personal agent to find the things you (and others) produce that are of interest to him. In a way, this will be analogous to the old readers that slurped up content from RSS feeds.

Someone might argue that "trusted brands" will still be important. This is mostly wishful thinking that reminds me of the early days of online tax preparation. In the early days of the internet I worked on an online tax product, but the market wasn't ready to put their financial information online. Within a few years, people were banking online, getting loans online, and volunteering their personal information at a horrifying pace.

Whatever small boost a trusted brand has now will disappear as people learn to trust their AI. And that won't take long. Their AI agent will be trained to their unique interests. No "trusted brand" can do that.

There will be early and late adopters, of course, and some people will opt out altogether. But over time most people will get accustomed to the idea that “their” AI is finding exactly the right content for them, and the AI itself will get better and better at its task.

The decline of search engines as the primary discovery tool. This is already happening. I query ChatGPT two or three times more often than I use a search engine. Search engines are becoming outdated already and will be as quaint as link farms in a couple years.

This means that content creators won’t be jumping through Google’s hoops, they’ll be jumping through the hoops required by Her. (I can’t think of a better name for these AI agents, so I’m referencing the 2013 movie starring Joaquin Phoenix where everyone had a personal AI assistant. It was remarkably prescient, and a good watch except for some really creepy stuff near the beginning.)

Content management systems will become the new content marketplace. The AI agent will search a publisher’s content database for the material Her clients will find useful. That will be the point of sale. Publishers won’t be selling content to a human being – at least not primarily. Publishers will be selling to Her. The e-store will be designed for transactions between Her and the publisher’s in-house AI. The CMS/e-store will probably have a series of license options, such as ...

- This article exactly as is, with our ads. Free.
- This article with your ads. 10 cents.
- This article transmogrified into some other format. 25 cents.
- Subscribe to all our content for \$10 per month.

The options will get way more complicated than that, and AI will figure them out.

Every user will set a monthly budget for content. Many people won’t pay any money – they’ll pay with their attention. Others will give their AI agent a budget to find content that fits with their preferences and interests. The AI will be optimized to engage and delight the user as much as possible — and to get him to view ads and buy things, of course.

Smart content creators won’t aim for the occasional article buy. They’ll try to structure their content to appeal to a market niche. They might even create a personality profile to assist the AI in matching the reader to the content – something along the lines of “This subscription service is designed for married women in their 40s who live in the American Southwest and love country music.”

Digital advertising will undergo a complete transformation in this new environment.

Publishing brands will be replaced with personalities. People don’t naturally trust a brand. What is a brand, after all? It’s an artificial construct. Human brains are wired to trust other people. Susie Ormand for financial advice. Megyn Kelly or Rachel Maddow for politics. Khaby Lame for humor. In addition to these human influencers, AI will discover market niches that haven’t been filled yet and create influencers to fill them.

Some of these personalities will be created by request of the consumer. It’s not hard to imagine a reader who wants a digital reconstruction of G.K. Chesterton to explain the news to him.

God save us!

Many of you will read this and think “who will save us from this madness? How do I opt out?”

I don't know. You might start by reading *The Butlerian Jihad* by Brian Herbert.

What should I do now?

Other than destroying data centers and becoming an anti-tech terrorist, here are some ideas.

- If you have the money, start building Her before some evil tech genius does it.
- Keep this framework in mind as you create and consume content. Note the things that will have to change.
- Think about content as fodder for an AI agent.
- Imagine ways to create content to make it easier for it to be transformed into other formats.
- Start focusing on personality-based content. Find some Christopher Hitchens clone to be your front man.
- Start categorizing your content like mad.

Bottom line: There's an earthquake coming. All content creators need to start thinking about how they will adapt to this strange new world.

Sincerely,



Greg Krehbiel



P.S. -- When I was a lad, we were taught that the first meaning of "he" is "a male," but it also means anyone without reference to their sex. There isn't a word in English that serves that function, so somewhere in the misty past we adopted he for that purpose. Everybody knew what that meant.

Some people didn't like that. They thought it implied an assumption of maleness. I thought, "did you miss that day in school?"

Then came the era of "he or she," which was annoying, but not nearly as annoying as indiscriminately switching back and forth between he and she. That just messed with my brain. When I read "he," I think, "okay, a person - anyone." When I read "she" I'm immediately wondering which woman we're talking about.

With the proliferation of pronouns, "he" is more necessary than ever. You can't say "he or she or ze or xe or ey or fa or per or ve," and trying to write around the issue all the time is tedious. "He" is perfectly functional, so I use it without apology.

P.P.S. - I recently discovered that I saved a client more than six figures on an annual basis! Talk about ROI! If you need help, call me.