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Dear Publishing professional,

Sorry this issue is a little late. I wrote the September issue, started printing it, and then ... I tore it up.

It was too depressing.

Not without reason. A lot of things are pretty bad. But if you're in publishing, you're already depressed. You don't need more bad news.

You also don't need happy clappy optimism - which always sets my teeth on edge. I like happiness and optimism as much as the next guy (I guess), but not when it's manufactured, and definitely not when it's just fresh paint on rotten wood.

Industries and cultures go through cycles. We're living through the ugly part of the cultural merry-go-round right now, where everything looks bleak and people lose hope. There's a serious "meaning crisis" out there and people are losing trust in just about everything.

The cultural cycle goes something like this.

- **Vitality and optimism** is followed by ...
- **Exuberance and excess.** That leads to ...
- **Incompetence, disillusionment and decline,** which is followed by ...
- **Exhaustion and a collapse of trust.**

These don't exist in a vacuum, and they're not just in our heads. There are reasons for the vitality, and then there are reasons for the disillusionment and the collapse of trust.

Out of the ...

- **Exhaustion and feeling of powerlessness** that flows from the collapse of trust comes a ...
- **Hunger for renewal.** Unless the culture is completely spent, this hunger can create ...
- **Early sparks of new art, new leaders, and new movements** that eventually result in ...



- **Rebuilding and revival**, taking us back to vitality and optimism.

The United States, and the west in general, has been through this cycle many times.

I think it's clear where we are in that cycle right now, and knowing that, we have a choice. **Do we give in to despair, or do we start looking for those new sparks?**

Although I've been speaking about the culture in general, the same pattern seems to apply to publishing. The whole industry is in a funk, but there are signs of renewal. We're nowhere near "vitality and optimism," but if we catch the right wave, we can surf ... for a little while.

Here are a few positive signs.

1. **There's a slow movement away from free content supported by ads**, which was a dumb idea.
2. **Old media empires (and models) are failing. New media empires are developing.**
 - Trust in traditional media is in the toilet. As it should be.
 - People are turning to podcasts and other alternative sources.
 - This will eventually consolidate into something professional and reliable.
3. We're in a period of experimentation and exploration, not entirely unlike the early days of newsletter publishing in the 1970s and 80s. **There are fortunes to be won.**
4. **AI looks like (fingers crossed) it might be a useful tool and not the end of the world after all.**

It's time to radically re-think publishing assumptions, methods and revenue models. Are you up for the challenge?

Okay ... I hear you. You want the bad news too. That's on the following pages.

But stay tuned. It's a time for creative thinking, and that's one thing I like to do. Keep an eye on this space.

Why AI and Google remind me of driver's ed

Do you ever feel as if you're being swept down a stream you didn't want to be on, with no control over your direction? That's how AI feels to me, and it reminds me of an experience from high school.

The brakes aren't doing anything!

Back in my day, high schools offered driver's ed as a class.

At my school, we had this hi-tech (for the 70s) training regime where everybody sat in a car simulator and reacted to a movie, which was a driver's view perspective of a trip through a city, merging onto a highway, etc.

We were supposed to "drive" our simulators in response to what we saw on the screen. Nothing we did changed anything on the screen, of course. It was a movie.

The instructor had a way to monitor what we were doing, e.g., whether we were turning when we should, using our turn signals, etc.

There was one scenario where our movie self was getting way too close to the car in front of us. I braked, but it didn't do any good. The image on the screen kept getting close to the car in front, and then that car stopped suddenly and "we all" (that is, the image on the screen, and by extension, all of us in our simulators) crashed into it.

The teacher said, "You're all dead."

I shouted out, "Not me. I braked two blocks back."

You put me in this situation!

I didn't think it was fair to be criticized by my driving instructor for being in a situation I had no way to avoid and took all the right steps to avoid.

That reminds me of Google and AI.

From the beginning of the Internet era, I recommended restricting content (or at least most content) to paying customers. The idea of the "free web" supported by advertising was clearly a mistake that was going to create the wrong incentives and destroy the publishers' relationship with their customers.

Then came Google. We were supposed to allow them to crawl and index our content with no legal agreement about what they could do with it. We were supposed to trust them because, you know, they had that sophomoric slogan: "Don't be evil."

Not only was this a scam, it set a bad precedent: any content out there on the web became open season for bots and crawlers. That was never legally true, but it became the default assumption.

Trading a sprained ankle ...

Then it got worse. Not only did we have to allow Google (and 10,000 other bots) to crawl our content, index it in their secret Willy Wonka factory and do what they pleased with it, but now we had to jump through their hoops for the privilege. We had to follow their guidelines

on tagging, schemas, indexes, and whatever else they came up with. As if we were working for them.

And like the abuse victims we were, we went along with it.

... for a broken leg

All this set the precedent for AI, which brazenly steals our content to create rival products and undercut the livelihood of the original creators.

With this history of bad decisions behind us, people now ask, "what should we do?"

I feel like I'm back in driver's ed class. I pushed on the brakes two blocks back and should never have been forced into this no-win situation, but (to switch metaphors) somebody else is steering this crazy raft and now we're in the rapids with a waterfall coming up soon.

Here we are. What do we do now?

Lawsuits, of course.

Copyright still exists, no matter what the tech titans think.

But ...

1. The law is a slow play,
2. It won't do all that much good, and
3. We're going to be on top of the rapids before the lawyers can file.

Some people are fighting back by dissing AI. They magnify the faults and errors in AI every chance they get. The goal is to destroy its reputation. Ridicule it. Make people feel embarrassed when they admit that they use it for content creation.

That's a losing strategy.

Mark Twain is quoted as saying "never pick a fight with people who buy ink by the barrel." So, these folk might think, "don't mess with us. We own publishing."

The trouble is that AI has a lot more ink than we do.

The horse is out of the barn. Closing the doors now doesn't help much. But ... that's not the right analogy.

We're the ones who are creating the new content. All AI can do it mimic or follow our instructions. We're the spring. All the fresh water flows downhill from us.

Where does that leave us?

Poison the well?

The angel on my right shoulder says, first, no matter what else is going on, focus on the basics. Make sure our legit customers get the content they need to improve their lives.

Thanks, angel, but we knew that, it's boring, and the falls keep getting closer.

The devil on my left shoulder says feed the thieving bastards a bunch of skibidi to poison their systems with BS. Create a website where only humans can get to the real content, and make sure the bots are crawling fake news.

That sounds like fun, but it would never work, for many reasons.

(Darn!)

So here we are. We've willingly participated in our own destruction. We sheepishly accepted a world that expects us to put content out on the internet "for free," which has contributed to the demise of our industry. And now we're wondering what or who can save us.

The first step is to admit that the "free internet" is the problem, not the solution.

We need a new model for a post-free Internet

I'm making the following assumptions.

- LLMs are here to stay.
- Humans will continue to be the source of creativity. AI can only mimic.
- People will pay for quality content they can trust.

Given that, here's a stab at a new model.

A Post-"Free Internet" Publishing Model

The Free Internet Was a Mistake

The "free content, ad-supported" model trained readers to expect something for nothing. That hollowed out publishing, and it handed over power to intermediaries. Google, social platforms, and now AI have built fortunes by intercepting audiences and monetizing them. That must end.

Here are some principles for a new publishing ecosystem.

1. Content has value

Professional reporting, analysis, and storytelling are the result of human skill and ingenuity. They are not free raw material for bots and aggregators.

2. The subscriber relationship belongs to the publisher

Platforms have lived by the motto, "your audience becomes our audience." That must end. Publishers must own the subscription relationship. Third parties may distribute — but they cannot own the customer data.

3. Remember who your customer is

Publishers must design for readers, not algorithms. Metrics of success have to shift from pageviews (and other nonsense metrics) to subscriber satisfaction, trust, and retention.

4. Intermediaries are rent seekers

Search engines, platforms, and AI are middlemen. They profit by diverting attention. Publishers must reclaim control of distribution and reject dependency on gatekeepers — whose goal is to steal the publishers' customers.

5. Access to content must be controlled

Open access without boundaries enables theft. Content must be protected through subscriptions, memberships, smart paywalls, and other technologies. It should only be available to other people's tech under controlled circumstances and by contract.

6. Publishers must collaborate

No single publisher can do this. Publishers should collectively invest in technologies (platforms for eBooks, podcasts, videos, etc.) that embrace the principles in this model.

7. Technology should enhance, not cannibalize

AI should serve customers — with summaries, personalization, and research aids — not undermine creators. Publishers must build tools that add value for paying readers, not for freeloaders.

8. Focus on expertise

In an age of synthetic content, human authority and creativity is the differentiator. Authorship, expertise, and transparency are the new trust signals.

Join the Resistance!

The free internet model is collapsing under its own contradictions. Publishers must reject it and build a sustainable digital economy where content is valuable, customers connect with publishers, and technology serves (rather than replaces) content creators.

Re: Cracker Barrel (because there's room)

Does "branding expert" mean anything anymore?

This seems simplistic, but I think it might be right.

- A good brand refresh involves getting to know your current customers and connecting with them more effectively.
- A bad brand refresh involves trying to change your customers.

There. I may have just saved you hundreds of millions of dollars.

Sincerely,



Greg Krehbiel



P.S. -- **I'm looking for new opportunities. Please contact me if you have any ideas or leads. Or if you want to hire me.**