

Above the Line

A Strategy for Author-Controlled Publishing in the Age of AI

Publishing has reached an uncomfortable point. The services traditionally used to justify the publisher's position between author and public are becoming abundant, inexpensive and increasingly executable by the author.

Editing can be assisted. Translation can be produced and reviewed rapidly. Typesetting can be automated. Metadata can be generated and maintained. Websites, electronic editions and print editions can be produced from the same source. Publicity material can be derived continuously from a work instead of being assembled hurriedly around a launch date. Audiences can be addressed directly. Campaigns can be measured, adapted and repeated. A book that disappeared from institutional attention six months after publication can remain computationally alive for decades.

Under these conditions the relevant question is no longer whether artificial intelligence can imitate parts of publishing. It plainly can. The relevant question is what remains of the publisher once the execution of publishing ceases to be scarce.

For the author, this changes the balance of power.

The publisher must cease to be an empty promise

A traditional publishing contract frequently asks the author to surrender significant rights and economic participation in return for an institutional promise: the work will be edited, produced, positioned, distributed and promoted.

The problem is not that publishers never perform these functions. The problem is that the promise and the actual allocation of attention are structurally different.

A publishing house has a programme. It has seasons, lists, new titles, lead titles, budgets and limited staff. Its attention necessarily moves. The author, by contrast, may remain responsible for the work for the rest of his or her life.

This produces an extraordinary contradiction. The institution claiming to be the long-term custodian of the work often has the shorter attention span.

Artificial intelligence makes that contradiction visible because it destroys the scarcity on which much of the service argument depended. A computational publishing system does not become bored with the backlist. It does not need to abandon one title because the spring programme has arrived. It can maintain metadata, editions, excerpts, campaign material, translations, contextual publications and public interfaces continuously.

The comparison is therefore not between an ideal publisher and a machine.

It is between the actual service delivered by the publisher and the persistent capability available to an author-controlled system.

If a publisher provides capital, serious editorial partnership, contractual expertise, established distribution, rights representation, institutional access or a demonstrable audience, these remain substantial contributions.

But they must be contributions, not mythology.

“Visibility”, “our network”, “positioning” and “marketing support” are no longer sufficient descriptions of value. They must become answerable questions.

What budget? Which channels? Which territories? Whose labour? For how long? What happens twelve months after publication? What happens five years later? What happens when the work unexpectedly becomes relevant again?

A publisher asking for rights should be able to answer these questions.

Publishing is becoming infrastructure

This change should not be confused with self-publishing as it developed during the first decades of digital distribution.

Self-publishing usually meant that an author substituted a collection of external services for a publisher. The author became a project manager: commissioning a cover, purchasing editing, arranging print-on-demand, entering metadata, managing social media and buying advertisements.

That model merely transferred administrative labour from the publisher to the author.

The next model is different.

Publishing becomes infrastructure.

A work can possess a structured source from which its manifestations are generated: website, print edition, electronic edition, catalogue information, excerpts, translations, publicity material, archival forms and future representations not yet invented.

The author does not repeatedly manufacture these objects. The publishing system knows how to derive them.

That difference is fundamental.

A manuscript ceases to be a file waiting to be processed by an institution. It becomes a semantic domain capable of producing and maintaining its own public manifestations under an author's authority.

The strategic objective is therefore not to automate a publishing house.

It is to give the author publishing sovereignty.

Artificial intelligence is creative

At this point the discussion usually becomes unnecessarily defensive.

“Artificial intelligence cannot really be creative.”

This statement depends on an impoverished model of creativity.

Creativity has never consisted simply of generating material from nothing. Human culture is profoundly recombinatory. Writers inherit language, genre, rhythm, images, myths, structures and other writers. Directors interpret existing plays. Conductors interpret scores they did not compose. Editors alter texts they did not originate. Actors speak sentences written by somebody else while producing an unmistakably individual performance.

Creation occurs through relation.

Selection is creative. Combination is creative. Transformation is creative. Constraint is creative. Interpretation is creative. Rejection is creative. Direction is creative. Revision is creative.

The establishment of a context in which one possibility is pursued and ten thousand others are abandoned is creative.

Artificial intelligence participates in this field because it is capable of producing variation, transformation, association and unforeseen combinations. That does not make the machine an author in every meaningful sense of the word. Nor does it remove human authorship.

It changes where authorship is exercised.

The author increasingly works above the line.

Above the line

Film production provides a useful metaphor.

Below the line lies execution: the enormous field of specialised work necessary to turn intention into an artefact. Above the line lies creative and strategic authority: the people who decide what is being made, why it exists, what belongs, what does not belong and when the work is finished.

The distinction is imperfect, but strategically useful.

Generative systems make enormous quantities of below-the-line intellectual production cheap.

A sentence can be proposed. A translation attempted. A layout generated. A campaign drafted. A stylesheet repaired. A hundred headlines compared. An illustration brief expanded.

None of these operations by itself determines the work.

The decisive human activity migrates toward choosing the domain, establishing its meaning, imposing constraints, recognising quality, rejecting irrelevance, connecting material, maintaining continuity and accepting responsibility for the resulting publication.

That is not the disappearance of authorship.

It is authorship becoming more explicit.

The person who asks only, “Did you type every word yourself?” is measuring authorship by the amount of manual execution it contains.

That is approximately as useful as determining whether a film director is creative by counting how many lamps the director personally carried onto the set.

The denunciation of AI text

This is why the increasingly ritualistic public denunciation of “AI text” should be understood carefully.

There are legitimate objections to artificial intelligence: undeclared automation, fabricated information, plagiarism, exploitative labour arrangements, concentration of technological power, opaque training practices, environmental cost and the substitution of generated mediocrity for thought.

These are serious matters.

But “this was made with AI” is not itself a critique.

When provenance becomes the criticism, criticism has abandoned the work.

A text should be challenged because it is false, dull, derivative, manipulative, incoherent or badly written. An image should be criticised because it fails as an image. An argument should be rejected because the argument fails.

Merely identifying a tool says almost nothing about the quality or meaning of the result.

The cultural insistence on exposing AI authorship can therefore also be read as the defensive reaction of a production model whose scarcity is disappearing.

The below-the-line operation was once evidence of professional value because it required specialist access, substantial labour and expensive infrastructure. When those operations become widely accessible, their former custodians understandably attempt to preserve distinction by turning the use of the new machinery into a mark of illegitimacy.

In that sense, the public cry of “AI-generated” can become the last defence of below-the-line scarcity against an above-the-line strategy of empowerment.

The strategic response should not be secrecy.

Nor should it be shame.

It should be responsibility.

The question is not: Was artificial intelligence involved?

The questions are: Who made the decisions? Who accepts responsibility? What is the work trying to accomplish? What was selected and rejected? Can its claims be examined? Can its provenance be understood where provenance matters? Who has authority to publish it?

These are substantially stronger questions.

The author's new position

An author equipped with executable publishing infrastructure occupies a position that previously required an organisation.

The author can maintain a catalogue. The author can operate an imprint. The author can preserve editions. The author can address audiences. The author can commission machine labour without surrendering authority to it. The author can maintain a work after the publicity cycle has ended.

And, crucially, the author can negotiate with publishers from a different position.

The proposition is no longer: Please publish me.

It becomes: This work already has a publishing system. What additional value can your institution contribute?

That changes the negotiation entirely.

A publisher might provide investment. A publisher might provide extraordinary editorial intelligence. A publisher might open territories the author cannot reach. A publisher might provide translation rights infrastructure, physical distribution, institutional legitimacy or a community built over decades.

Excellent.

Then a partnership exists.

But publication itself is no longer the consideration being exchanged.

The author already possesses publication.

From publishing service to cultural institution

This development need not destroy publishers.

It may rescue publishing from the service business it has gradually mistaken itself for.

The publisher of the future has an opportunity to become more recognisably a publisher again: someone who selects, commits, invests, contextualises and keeps faith with a body of work.

The printing press was never the publisher. The typesetter was never the publisher. The warehouse was never the publisher. The metadata department is not the publisher. The social-media account is not the publisher. And the language model will not be the publisher either.

These are instruments.

The publisher begins where responsibility for the cultural existence of the work begins.

The same is true of the author.

Strategic position

Our position is therefore straightforward.

We do not build artificial intelligence in order to replace creativity.

We use artificial intelligence to remove the historical coupling between creativity and scarce production labour.

We do not automate authorship.

We automate everything around authorship that unnecessarily prevents authors from exercising it.

We do not regard the generated object as the final unit of value.

We regard the governed domain as the unit of value.

We do not ask a machine to become an author.

We give authors machines.

And we do not define publishing as the provision of services that increasingly abundant technology can perform.

Publishing is the sustained assumption of responsibility for a work entering public life.

That responsibility can belong to an established publishing house. It can belong to a new institution. And increasingly, it can remain with the author.

The strategic consequence is profound:

The author no longer needs a publisher in order to publish.

A publisher must therefore offer something better.

Partnership. Capital. Judgement. Reach. Context. Commitment. Continuity.

Anything less is an empty promise wrapped around services the author can now command directly.

Artificial intelligence does not abolish the publisher.

It abolishes the publisher's right to be taken for granted.

And it does not diminish the author.

Properly governed, it gives the author the means to move above the line.