Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Ryan Powell

How can the media avoid being merely content suppliers for Big Tech?



A healthy information environment depends on supply and demand for quality inputs.

To remain competitive and independent in an AI-powered ecosystem, news outlets, publishers, research institutes, and NGOs will need to develop their own skills and tools for establishing where information comes from and whether it can be trusted.

Otherwise, they will lose the independence they need to set their agenda in dialogue with audiences and serve the public interest.

In September, unredacted files from The New York Times' lawsuit against OpenAI and Microsoft revealed what one of Microsoft's own senior scientists called the use of copyrighted material to train AI models the "largest theft of labor in human history."

Publishers are beginning to push back. According to NewsGuard, 67% of the most-engaged news sites now block crawlers from accessing archives of their content, and the lawsuits are piling up.

But blocking is a defensive position, and it leaves an important question unanswered: What could publishers do with those archives themselves?

A news outlet's archive is one asset AI companies cannot replicate. In Guatemala and South Africa, media organizations and nonprofits have stopped treating their archives as just something to maintain.

They're building chatbots that answer farmers' questions, tools that let local readers dig into procurement databases, and systems that sort thousands of reader comments a week.

How much influence media outlets have over information markets depends on their capacity to innovate.

The economics of information

The problem is that Big Tech still sets the incentives. Publishers are taking LLM developers to court while trying to track where their content ends up and find ways to charge bots and AI agents for access.

Organizations with deep content archives and a willingness to experiment are already using AI to gain competitive advantages that were previously out of reach.

> As the economics of information change rapidly, some are selling real-time data and analysis that clients can act on or tapping into crowd-powered prediction markets

For decades, news organizations have competed on the quality of their journalism and sources.

But with information more plentiful than ever, they are looking for ways to build trust and reach new audiences.

As the economics of information change rapidly, some are selling real-time data and analysis that clients can act on or tapping into crowd-powered prediction markets.

But where does that leave publishers whose value lies in authorship and community?

From native advertising and sponsorships to in-house AI tools

Around the world, independent publishers are developing AI tools of their own, running models locally and carefully mapping their data architecture.

They are also training models only on verifiable proprietary data and exploring community-based, open-source, and commercial uses early in product development.

These investments are creating new revenue

streams, from native advertising and sponsorships to in-house AI tools.

Food for Mzansi, an agriculture-focused publisher in South Africa, has developed Agri-Pulse 360, an AI ecosystem that provides small-scale commercial farmers with round-the-clock access to practical advice.

Drawing on the organization's eight-year content library with thousands of articles, the chatbot uses retrieval-augmented generation (RAG) to answer farmers' questions and will eventually be available through WhatsApp.

Agri-Pulse 360 can also be used to generate TikTok reels and track newsletter subscribers' reading habits.

Food for Mzansi wants to attract advertisers through a native advertising tool it calls "Solution Moments."

It is also seeking pilot sponsorships from major brands for AI-generated technical workflows and aims to automate client promotions within targeted newsletters.



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In Guatemala, independent news outlet Ojoconmipisto and data provider Sociedad.info launched Pin Local, an AI tool that draws on government-spending records to produce personalized weekly newsletters.

Ojoconmipisto's journalists do the reporting, and Sociedad.info's AI searches its public-procurement database for information relevant to readers in each of Guatemala's 22 administrative regions.

The same system could work with data from other countries and allow the organization to sell customized reports on individual procurement contracts.

In Argentina, fact-checker Chequeado is using AI to sift through the thousands of comments it receives from readers each week.

Its tool, Nunchi, uses enterprise models to classify these comments by sentiment and intent and then ranks them by relevance.

It was even trained to understand humor and irony. Editors get a Slack brief twice a day with recurring topics and questions that haven't been covered. They can also use a dashboard to see how audience interest is shifting over time.

In Colombia, Cuestión Pública has built six Model Context Protocol (MCP) servers that connect to 13 public-procurement databases, a national business register, and its own reporting archive.

The system lets users explore records covering nine million companies, daily political events, and politically connected individuals in a single conversation. Cuestión Pública also tracks token use live on its site.

It previously relied on the speed and usability of a chatbot but is now focusing on generating more value through a tool that supports accountability reporting.

The organization also plans to release a privacy-focused version as a paid service.

The search for new revenue streams

What drives these projects is the search for new revenue streams beyond traditional news products.

Some publishers are attempting to earn audience loyalty by building direct relationships with their readers, while others treat information as a liquid commodity, selling it to AI firms by the unit.

> Publishers need to understand how their content is being used and retain control over it

Either way, publishers need to understand how their content is being used and retain control over it.

To compete in this emerging landscape and avoid being relegated to content suppliers for Big Tech, they need the freedom to experiment and the resources to develop and scale new products on their own terms.

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