

A MANIFESTO BY PAUL JEFFKO · JUNE 2026

Mighty Words.

Your content is yours to control.

On the value of sanctioned creative works in the age of artificial intelligence — and how creators reclaim the point of control.

IN FOUR PARTS

BEGIN OVERLEAF →

I

 PART ONE

Back to the future: Apocalypse 2.0.

When will publishers put their foot down? Will the big five have it their way again? Falling for the same lie.

§



MAIN STREET AT FIRST LIGHT — THE VALUE NEVER LEFT; ONLY THE POINT OF CONTROL MOVED.

NEW NAME, SAME MISTAKES.

A long, long time ago, like 2003, publishing was running on a tried-and-true business model. When the internet came, the model did not change. What changed was publishers giving up control of their works. That led to third parties taking over the business of advertising – monetizing your content.

But, does the sale of advertising determine value? Or is the content the value? For publishers, advertising and classifieds disappeared, leading to business collapse. For Google and many other third-party aggregators, it was and remains all about the content.

To succeed, they needed your content, and they needed it for free. They needed to convince you of an existential threat if you did not cooperate. We gave in. We accepted the simple premise that we were powerless, there was no way to be found on the internet unless we allowed third parties to crawl and control our online content.

There are many arguments explaining what happened: when, where, and why. But something happened. Something that caused great losses for publishers. Now, with AI's total online integration nearly complete, will we demand change, credit, compensation? Or just go with their flow once again?

MONETIZING YOUR CONTENT (FOR THEMSELVES).

Then as now, Google and an unrestrained gaggle of gold diggers monetize your product by controlling its distribution. Your work product, and that of millions of others together constitute their work product. They promote their work product as the authority; therefore, we must be included in their work product.

They have convinced us that we must do this. That their new world order demanded that 'the internet' must be the point of control. But why do we accept that? Why do we give up control? And what about their use of your content in AI?

With AI, nothing is changed for them. They still need your work product in order to have a work product of their own – one they can

monetize. How they monetize is irrelevant. The bottom line is they monetize your content and do not pay you.

Crawling your content to make it discoverable on the public internet offered the small benefit of receiving traffic. But for publishers, there is a major difference when it comes to AI. Your content must be digested by AI before it can be monetized. Your content is a necessary "ingredient" needed to make their work product saleable; it's baked in.

Here is the key difference between the internet and AI: with the internet model they sell advertising placed next to your content. With the AI model they sell your content.

EXPLOITATION: ABSENCE OF CONTROL.

Imagine a competitor across town that captured your morning edition content then republished it in their evening edition. Now imagine their defense is that you "put your information out there in public — therefore we have a right to use it — it is simply public knowledge." Would that have been acceptable in 1985?

Of course not. Back then we could comfortably rely on existing copyright law. What has changed now?

The only thing that changed is you agreed to give "search engines" your content, based on a lie. That if you did not, you would no longer exist. That they would protect your future if you made them whole every week. Content creators fell for a simple – and disabling – protection racket.

AI is just a new technology. Nothing more. But, with its complexity comes uncertainty, fear, and the need for protection – gold for those who intend to mine your works based on the same lie.

For creators, there's a simple solution, but it will take great will and determination. It is so basic that it is common sense.

CONTINUES IN PART TWO →

*With the internet model they sell
advertising placed next to your
content. With the AI model they sell
your content.*

UP NEXT · PART TWO**Reawakening of value.**

Why AI's need for quality, human-verified work returns the point of control to the creator — and what "intelligence value" is really worth.

II PART TWO

Reawakening of value.

Value questions or answers? Rebranding the perfect scheme. Publisher powershift?

§



THE PAGE IN THE HAND — QUALITY, TIMELINESS, AND TRUTH ARE THE NEW CURRENCY OF AI.

REDUCING CREATIVITY TO COMMODITY.

In the glory days of their content gold rush of 2003 to 2005 there was much talk of supporting publishers and the preservation of archives.

Companies like Google would lead the way with financial and technical support. But organizing relationships and harvesting that content was expensive and time consuming.

Their needs were more immediate. Better to redefine value through traffic, clicks, ads. Pay anyone with content – commoditize to monetize. All content shall be valued the same and measured against “performance”.

It used to be that massive amounts of static content was all that was needed to run their model: search. And the elegance was consumers did not know what they didn’t have, people only knew what came back in the search hitlist – the basis of performance.

But with AI, “the question” is no longer the value – “the answer” is the thing to be monetized. And so a quandary appears: answers returned to paying customers must be trustworthy, accurate, and complete. Now they need to mine and extract the “intelligence value” previously discarded as worthless tailings.

Their own trained generative AI product acknowledges that your work is the highest value:

I am a newspaper publisher. Using “the gold rush” as a metaphor for AI, what is the “gold” in the gold rush?

*To be the “pick and shovel” provider to the AI gold rush, your newspaper shouldn’t chase the AI tools. Instead, you should sell the one thing AI models desperately need to survive: **high-quality, human-verified training data**. Large Language Models (LLMs) are running out of clean data to learn from, making your archives and daily reporting the premium “shovels” of this era.*

– GOOGLE GEMINI 6/1/2026; INCLUDING ALL BOLDING.

That’s right. AI is nothing without creative works – your works.

MODIFY THE SCHEME.

Now a kind of maturity of technology is revealed.

This new technology still needs massive amounts of information, but unlike the internet era, it now requires two defining, essential elements: quality and maintenance.

The old model needed chum, bulk, headlines, words to search – but only to drive the incessant need to sell more stuff. This new AI technology requires quality because when barkers bill the show as “intelligent,” the

audience must believe it. Businesses that rely on AI must have authenticity and fact with timely updates. They cannot rely on junk data rife with marketing, questionable facts, hallucinations, and outright lies.

So, to make people believe it is intelligent, they must have a base ingredient that is not just characters and words, but an ingredient with purpose and clarity, one having its own reason to exist in the present and the future. They need what you have, but they need it for free:

It won’t be as easy this time around. These publishers are wising up. How to approach? Wait, why try to reinvent the wheel, let’s just adjust the scheme a bit. The most important thing is to maintain the commodity and keep acquisition expenditures below base line historic performance values.

Valuing creative works shall continue to be reduced to “performance” by their standards, under the threat of irrelevancy. Modifying the internet model to the AI model is straightforward for them. Just change up the lingo.

Now comes “pay per scrape” and “pay per use”. One that simply replaces pay per click, the other a fantastical claim to track use of your six, ten, 18 word creations – out of trillions of others. In both cases, publishers will not receive compensatory value for their work from the actual cash being generated by the pirated content transactions.

VALIDATION.

Publishers are loudly making their position clear: they want to be compensated. But what should that compensation be? A shiny penny or a hundred dollar bill? That’s the spread.

Their AI admits that it cannot exist without a publisher’s creative works. It must have your work to feed the machine. Its success or failure rests with you. You are in the power position. How? Because their need for creative works is ongoing, with no end. Its existence must be maintained hourly, daily, weekly. Their paying customers now demand answers that are factual, grounded, and authoritative.

In their old model, the commodity was your content. Now the tables have turned: AI is the commodity; it’s everywhere, in everything. But creative works are limited, exclusive, and necessary. You are needed now and a year from now. Each time you create, there is new value.

The demand for your valuable works is exploding. This new technology needs your work in order to exist. In the past, their technology was the gate. But now, access to your work is the point of control. Your point of control.

CONTINUES IN PART THREE →

AI is nothing without creative works – your works.

UP NEXT · PART THREE

Technology is subordinate.

Words can exist without the technology; the technology cannot exist without the words.

III

 PART THREE

Technology is subordinate.

Recognize true value. Pressure mounting, screws turning. Jump ship, or grab the helm?

§



TAKE THE HELM. WORDS CAN EXIST WITHOUT THE TECHNOLOGY; THE TECHNOLOGY CANNOT EXIST WITHOUT THE WORDS.

YOUR CREATIVE WORKS: THE SUPERIOR VALUE.

As technology moves from “questions” to “answers,” your true value is revealed. Answers come from knowledge, sure. But where does the underlying knowledge come from? A computer program? No, it comes from you.

Some creators win, some lose. Will we complain our way to success? Or take charge with offensive strategy? Eventually someone will figure out the model to make money from content. Our forefathers did it. Google did it. Why can’t we do it? Because we do not understand, or perhaps accept, the value proposition.

Let’s say you ran a lumber yard, and the local builder demanded you provide all the boards required to complete the project for free, and that he’d pay you a percentage of his profit. Absurd, right? But that is what we’ve done. Logically, ingredients used in further manufacturing must be paid for up front. The builder assumes the risk, not the lumber yard. The price is the price.

Where is the value? Is it technology or words? Perhaps it is both. For certain, words can exist without technology. But this AI technology simply cannot exist without words. Your words.

Separating creative works from technology reveals the very high value of your work. But they don’t want you to think that way. They want you to believe that information is valueless without their technology.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER.

They need your creative works. They will do anything to obtain your works. And you will hand over your works, voluntarily. That is their premise. You are independent, think for yourself, and act independently. They would like to keep it that way.

In the fold, minds come together. Plans are made. Strategies discussed. Can content creators be brought back to the fold? We used to be independent yet connected. Maintaining separation, embracing independence is key to their success. The more independent we are, the more power they have.

We are trained that independence is preferred. But what they mean and what we perceive as independence are radically different. For them, your independence is a tactic. For you, independent thinking is reflected in your work. And your isolation, your physical

independence from others like you, that’s reflected in your bottom line.

MEDIA TRADES CONFOUNDED.

Once upon a time, nearly every creator of content was gathered and protected by way of trade associations. The weakening of newspaper associations and media trade groups is and always was a component of their success. Their attack has been brutal and relentless.

They explained to us that their technology meant they would now be the point of control. And the point of finance. You have no choice because this new technology was all consuming and all giving. Participate or disappear. Associations became reluctant flag-wavers.

They focus association leadership on the fires so they don’t see the attack: create dead-end programs churned from hopeful nostalgia, promote the belief that things can return to normal – if only you follow their process and rules. Seek out revenue in dark corners of your operation, and for certain learn to live on a tiny fraction of previous cashflow.

Their attack is nearly complete. With their constant barrage of technology and ever evolving punitive rules designed for their own benefit, creators and their trade associations have suffered greatly. Even once omnipotent news associations, befuddled by problems that appear unsolvable, have tossed out their founding membership and business models. But that instinct to recoil is misguided. Written word creators will forever anchor all media.

The newspaper associations and media trade groups are essential to recapturing past market power and enforcing the value returned to creators. Leadership must now focus on dealing with this new threat which necessarily consumes creative content. Creators must be sanctioned, protected, and promoted; their works put on the open market where value will be determined.

It will be challenging to accomplish this new order. But rejecting it means certain loss. This is the moment to retake control with strength and determination.

CONTINUES IN PART FOUR →

*Words can exist without technology. But this
AI technology simply cannot exist without
words. Your words.*

UP NEXT · PART FOUR

Revelation: your intelligence value.

Back to the fold — sanctioning, protection, promotion, and a member-owned cooperative built for creator benefit.

IV

PART FOUR

Revelation: your intelligence value.

Run for cover or redemption? Forum or quorum? Pirates over a barrel or walk the plank.

§



BACK TO THE FOLD. SANCTIONING, PROTECTION, PROMOTION — THE STRENGTH OF THE TRADE REBUILT.

CLOISTERED INDEPENDENCE.

Time to take charge. Stop whimpering in silence and get up. Will you defend your independence to spite your success? Do you want to win, or take what you get?

It's time to stop running to team dugouts to pat each other on the back, give inspirational speeches, tell each other "it's only the seventh inning, we can do this!"

You are losing the game. Time to make a change. Step out and do it. Now is the time for all good publishers and content creators to gather for revelation. That you can be paid, should be paid, shall be paid. It is past time for redemption.

BACK TO THE FOLD: STRENGTH IN NUMBERS.

When we come back to our business roots, to a time before the internet, we were joined through our press and media associations. Then as now, they provided the sanctioning authority we can very much use today. The authority to claim intelligence value which directly equates to dollar value.

The intrinsic value provided by the association is sanctioning, protection, and promotion. Sanctioning by establishing qualifications, protection by defending members' professional interests, and promotion which asserts its authority to determine standards and quality. The association is a capable and necessary force – its strength derived from members united as a trade.

But healthy and aggressive associations are a direct threat: to maintain the interlopers' commodity valuation of your works, publisher isolation – your independence – is mandatory. Associations can defeat that tactic by cultivating and growing membership with countermeasures focused on protecting and reclaiming creator value.

COOPERATIVE: CREATE, BUNDLE, SELL, REPEAT.

Imagine publishers of creative works aligned with their associations. Further imagine associations aligned with a cooperative designed for their members' financial advantage. A flat out member owned co-op that exists solely for creator benefit, not a privately held industrial chop shop that treats your content as a commodity.

The cooperative's intrinsic value would be to curate, maintain, and monetize on scale, freeing publishers from the need to negotiate low-

value independent royalty deals. It would curate member content in a purpose built system which allows for bundling like for the newsstand: each day a new bundle is created, delivered, and sold. Not once, but many times over. Everybody pays.

Then it would maintain the creative works by providing a never ending flow of 'product' to the market. There are no one-off deals: everybody pays every day. Each minute new content is added. Each minute new content is sold. Like the newspaper box, every copy is a paid copy.

Monetize through distribution at highest and best value. There are tens of thousands of publishers, but perhaps just hundreds of major AI firms. Make them compete, make them pay. Don't want to pay? No problem – you're out.

Their clients are wising up too, pressuring these AI firms to guarantee they have used properly licensed creative works. Rampant litigation is helping drive them to honesty, but for the co-op, leverage is key.

Like the protection racket they used on you: pay us to receive our stamp of approval. Our stamp tells your paying customers they are protected from copyright infringement lawsuits and piracy litigation; the leverage of access through centralized control; and of course the gold star which comes through association sanctioning.

Here is what you would be offering them: best quality creative works, free of piracy litigation, and fully licensed copyrights. All in an automated system that seamlessly delivers fresh content continuously; the ability to maintain their AI value by receiving and digesting creative content daily.

The technology exists today to create such a cooperative enterprise. What is needed is willingness and determination on the part of creators to recognize they cannot make it alone. They must come together. There is a great cost to do this. The financial potential for publishers is enormous.

I said at the beginning that the solution is simple. That it's common sense. If sanctioned content creators join together, in a non-exclusive fashion, and build a system where member-only content can be presented to the market while consuming only the revenue needed to sustain the system, then this new point of control can deliver the redemption everyone wants.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Jeffko founded SmallTownPapers in 1999 and serves as the company's president. He champions the preservation, validation, and economics of creative written works.

**RETURN TO PART ONE**

The case begins again.