

Can we protect our intellectual property from AI?

When you take a break...

I haven't blogged in nearly a year and a half, and now, as I've recommitted to blogging more regularly, I come to find out that my content can end up being used by AI. I've seen some content producers say that they've cut back on the amount of information they share on blogs and other social media channels because they are tired of seeing it stolen and used by AI without attribution or compensation.

Meanwhile, more and more businesses are embracing AI to produce content and other written materials, such as emails, social media posts, etc. In fact, not a day goes by that I don't get spam emails offering me AI training.

AI has changed our world

What is happening is that AI is going over everything in the public domain to answer queries and produce documents. It is also "learning" from your data and content.

AI may be taking over the world, but should it take over our intellectual property?

What differentiates my blog and any written material I produce is me—my experience, my creativity, my point of view. I choose how to write something, what to include, the angle it takes, and the tone it uses. It doesn't seem right that AI could take what makes my writing unique to me and use it to recreate content for others to use. What can be done?

You need to protect your content

It turns out as content producers, we now must protect our websites and blogs from AI bots. Although AI is not supposed to use material that is copyrighted (you do have a copyright on your website, don't you?), I am not sure that is stopping those bots.

It seems we have to go on the offensive and create actual obstacles for these bots. Dave Morelo provides several actions you can take in the article [How to Protect Your Website From AI Scraping](#). However, many of Morelo's suggestions also mean reducing the visibility of your content. This will also impact your website and blog as it will most likely reduce visits, and maybe impact your SEO.

The bottom line is that right now we are living in the wild world of AI, and it has consequences for those of us who produce original content. We'll have to find a balance between protecting our content and allowing people to find it.

You need a reality check

This morning, I was reading an personal advice column in the Washington Post. It was about a woman whose mother-in-law is constantly bad mouthing her and who is trying to protect her son from the MIL's barbs. The columnist's advice was to keep the MIL away from her impressionable son. But a reader offered a different perspective, saying that kids can see through those things and they can develop good relationships with grandparents in spite of this negativity. I don't know who is right, but it shows the need to look at something from a different perspective or even various viewpoints. In other words, the woman seeking advice needed a reality check.

What is a reality check?

A reality check often provides a perspective we hadn't considered before or that we have discounted. It's why we often seek advice when making big decisions.

Why do you need a reality check?

If you are facing any sort of challenge—marketing, communications, interpersonal—you need a reality check. When you don't get advice or outside perspective, you will make decisions that are not always sound. This is why there's value to doing research and holding focus groups before you launch a product. It's the value of hiring consultants to provide non-organizational viewpoints when you are trying to find a solution.

It's like when you don't get someone to proofread your work and it goes out with a typo or two. (As an aside, last month I saw a big typo in a poster for a large consulting firm's advertising campaign. It was classic...I wish I had a picture). You are so involved in something you no longer have a clear-eyed view of it. You don't see the shortcomings or the mistakes or the errors in judgement.



Pic by Fauxels from Pexels.com

It's the value of professional advice and an outside perspective

In communications, the lack of a reality check often results in you missing the target or having a miscommunication. If you think something is clear because you understand it, it could be that somebody else does not get it. Perhaps you are using jargon that only people in your field use. Perhaps you are using language that is above the grade level of your audience. For example, a few years ago, I wrote some marketing copy for a hotel booking software company. I wrote that using this software would give hotel operators exponential growth. The client hated it! He said that most people won't understand what exponential means. I am not 100% sure he was right, but at the same time, he gave me a reality check about the words I was choosing to use.

Reality checks help avoid mistakes

Reality checks in the form of outside counsel can often save you from making costly mistakes. You get a reality check whenever you hire a professional to do something for you. It

could be market research, or graphic design, or UX design, or copy editing. Let someone who has experience and an outside perspective help you.

Do you need a reality check?

How to jump-start your blog

It's been [gasp] seven long months since I posted anything on this blog. Before my last post, I had been posting about monthly (ish), but it became harder to come up with good ideas. And I believe if you have nothing worthwhile to say (blog), then don't say (blog) anything.

But here we are in a new year, and it is time for a fresh start. I need to jump-start my blog, and here is how to do it.

Do I really want to blog again?

The most crucial question to ask is: Do I really want to or need to start blogging again? There's no getting around that blogging requires a good deal of work, commitment, and time. Perhaps you don't have the resources to blog, or the motivation to do it consistently.

If you decide not to start blogging again, I recommend eliminating or at least hiding the blog from your website. An outdated blog is the equivalent of a dusty, cobweb covered office. When I visit a website, I always check on the blog to see when it was last updated, and if it hasn't been updated in a while, I am not sure if the business or organization is still active.

If you do want to blog, take these 5 steps:

1. Get clear on your motivation or goal for the blog.

Remember or reset your objective for blogging. What do you want to accomplish? It could be:

- Thought leadership
- Lead generation
- Inform your target audience
- Advocate for a cause
- Provide added value for your customers

2. Brainstorm topics and issues

Once you know what you want to do, then you have to think of ideas or topics. I recommend setting up a brainstorming session (if you have a team, definitely get them involved). Start with topics/categories and then get down to specifics. For example, an animal defense charity could list topics such as: animal rights, endangered species, etc. With that topic list in mind, start thinking of specific issues you want to cover, such as: new laws that are affecting animal rights, new additions to endangered species, , etc.

3. List your keywords

Blogs still work to improve your search engine optimization (SEO). You may have a plug-in on your blog to help with SEO (e.g., All in One SEO, Yoast). However, you have to be strategic in your blogging and use keywords and key phrases that you want your website to rank for. Take the time to do some keyword research and then list your target keywords/key phrases.

4. Set up an editorial calendar

When you put things in writing, you have a better chance that they get done. An editorial calendar is a great tool to make blogging happen. You will have an overview of what you want to write and when you will publish it. It doesn't need to be complex or require special software.

To create an editorial calendar, set up a table or spreadsheet with these tabs (at minimum):

- Month/Date
- Topic/category
- Subject/working title
- Author
- Target keywords

If you need some additional information or templates, check out “How to Create an Editorial Calendar [example + templates]” on Hubspot or “Editorial Calendar Tools and Templates To Help You Master Your Content To-Do List” from the Content Marketing Institute.

5. Find inspiration

To make it easier to find relevant issues to write about, seek out inspiration. Here are a few ways to find inspiration:

- Set up Google Alerts for your topics
- Follow relevant hashtags on social media
- Read industry publications
- Attend professional development events or presentations about your subject

Now, you should be set to start blogging [again].

Please let me know in the comments if you've stopped blogging and why, and whether you plan to restart your blog.

Do you need a proofreader or a copy editor?

What are you trying to accomplish?

Recently, I saw a query on a listserv looking for a copy editor. The author said she needed a “basic proof” done for spelling, grammar, and for the “missed half sentence in the middle of a paragraph.” In fact, she didn’t need a copy editor—what she needed was a proofreader. Proofreading is a different skill than copy editing. While copy editors can be proofreaders, that is not their main function.



How to get your writing from draft to finished product

When you are creating any type of written work, you should follow these steps:

1. Write a rough draft
2. Review and rewrite
3. Copy edit
4. Incorporate edits
5. Produce final document
6. Proofread
7. Publish

What is copy editing?

Copy editing reviews your work for clarity, consistency, style, and accuracy. This can include everything from fact checking to rearranging copy for flow to flagging duplicate content. Copy editing allows your thoughts to be expressed in the clearest way possible. A thorough copy editing job will shore up your thesis by making sure your main points are clear and supported.

What is proofreading?

Proofreading checks your copy for errors, such as typos, misspellings, and missing punctuation. The best proofreaders will fact check to make sure dates and numbers are accurate, and names are spelled correctly. Proofreading does not rearrange your copy unless it is a spacing issue. More importantly, proofreading is not designed to make your writing clearer but to ensure your copy is error-free.

Keep in mind that using your word processor's spell check is not the same as proofreading. Spell check checks the spelling of a word, not its usage. For example, you could've typed "fair" instead of "fare" in an article about subway prices, and though the word is spelled correctly, it is not used correctly.

So many (preventable) mistakes

Too many folks skip the copy editing and think that they can get by with doing a proofreading. For sure, you should always

proofread, since it prevents your work from being riddled with typos and other embarrassing mistakes. A copy edit would improve the content.

Here's a sampling of errors I've collected over the past few days. Proofreading before publishing would've prevented these:

Using the word **isles** instead of aisles in an article in today's *Washington Post*.

A email subject line that says "Stay on top of the governor's **rack**" (instead of race).

Or an email that tells me to "**Pre oreder** your set today."

Or a survey (from a professional editing association, no less) answer option that says "Professional **Devlopment**"

And so many more. It's as if most organizations have given up on proofreading. Perhaps they don't think it's worth the time, effort, or cost.

Bottom line: If you take your work seriously and want to give it credibility, spend the effort required to get your work both copy edited and proofread before you publish.

Proofing to improve your credibility

It seems not a day goes by without me spotting at least one typo or other error in blog posts, newsletters and other

communications (generally the digital type). I've even seen errors on the chyrons for the local news.



Here's a sampling from the past couple of weeks:

In a sub-headline on a TV news website, it said **baht** instead of bath (and spellcheck didn't pick it up because baht is the currency in Thailand).

On a headline on WETA's Tellyvisions blog, there's mention regarding the new season of a show called **Saniton** (which, in actuality is called Sanditon). (I just checked and this typo has been fixed).

In a newsletter from a restaurant it says a new menu will debut on **Wedensday**.

The call-to-action button on a communications agency's newsletter says, "Read the full case study on our **wesite**."

Those are glaringly obvious typos. There are many other not-

so-glaring mistakes on stuff such as grammar (e.g., using the wrong pronouns or having a dangling modifier) and wrong information (e.g., saying an event is taking place on Tuesday when it is really taking place on Thursday).

It's human to make mistakes. We all do it. But when you make mistakes on professional or official communications, it undermines your credibility. It makes you look unprofessional, and sometimes it makes you look ignorant.

This need for checking your work is summarized beautifully in the The Freelance Creative article "Why Marketing Writers and Editors Need to Master Fact-Checking" when it says:

"The more reliable and high-quality [the content] is for readers, the more it confers trust in and value of the brand behind it," Dimond said. "If a reader can't depend on the basic facts of a blog post, it's a clear message that they can't trust the brand."

In other words, copy that is accurate and error-free helps build your brand. Yet lately, I've noticed more mistakes than ever. It seems nobody is bothering to proofread, let alone fact check or copy edit.

What is causing this?

I think there are three reasons that account for the avalanche of mistakes I've seen lately:

1. Speed

The biggest culprit is most likely speed. People are under pressure to get things done quickly, at the pace of social media. But rushing to get a newsletter out or post an article invariably leads to sloppy or no proofreading.

2. You don't know what you don't know and you don't even know to ask

I got a newsletter a few days ago from a journalist. In it, he writes he made a mistake spelling a subject's name in the previous day's newsletter, something which was pointed out to him by a reader. This says to me that this journalist didn't even do basic fact checking (e.g., Google subject's name to see how it is spelled) nor had a copy editor look at his copy (copy editors routinely check spelling and other facts).

3. Lack of quality control

Too many times people overestimate their abilities and don't take the step to have another person read/proof their work. Sometimes, there simply is no process in place to create a quality check before a communication goes out to the public.

Bottom line

Mistakes hurt your credibility. You can minimize the damage by creating a proofreading/fact checking/copy editing process that you follow before sending or publishing every single piece of public communication.

3 actions to improve your marketing communications

Improving marketing means making it effective

It's not enough for your marketing efforts to include a clever headline, a fantastic design or great graphics. Your marketing communications need to be effective. To be effective, your communications must *resonate* with your intended audience. That is, audiences must *understand* what you are saying, *agree* with

the premise, and then *act* (e.g., buy your product, donate to your cause, vote for your candidate).

But sometimes, marketing communications efforts don't achieve their goals. Here are three actions you can take that are guaranteed to improve your efforts. And improving your marketing communications could improve your results.

1. Explain the why

Your primary task is to explain why your customer should do business with you. Is it because you have the best quality, the best prices, the highest reliability? Do you solve an issue your customer has? You also have to establish why someone would choose your organization over another organization that does the same thing.

2. Use plain language

Plain language is about making it easy to understand what you are saying. Perhaps you think using big words and industry terms makes you look more knowledgeable. It doesn't. It makes it harder for your audience to understand what you are saying. So lose the jargon and the multi-syllable words. Focus on making things easy to read and understand.

(Read my post on plain language: People should understand)

3. Pay attention to details

The other day three packages were delivered to my door. I wasn't expecting anything, and when I opened the door, I saw none of them were for me. The delivery truck was still outside so I called out to the driver. She claimed that the GPS sent her to my house. The house number on the packages was the same as my house, but not the street. If you don't pay attention to details, you end up delivering packages to the wrong address.

You have to check and double check. Fact check and proofread

everything, from the headline or the subject line to the website link to the caption. EVERYTHING. If you don't, you risk making sloppy mistakes.

Mistakes (sloppy or factual) result in lost credibility. Lost credibility results in lost support. Yes, details do matter.

Here's the bottom line: Prioritize the basics of communications to improve your marketing efforts and boost your results.

One attribute to improve your marketing efforts in 2022

First, a story

Over the holidays, I flew in and out of Dulles Airport, which has an (exclusive?) arrangement with the Washington Flyer taxi company. I made a reservation for a Washington Flyer taxi to pick me up and drive me to the airport. The driver arrived early to pick me up. He carried my suitcase down my front steps to the car. He asked me if I had everything I needed and then we were off. We had a nice chat, and before you knew it, we were at the airport, where he wished me a safe journey. It was a five-star experience.

On my way back, however, my experience rated two stars at best. Why? It was the same company (Washington Flyer), the same route, but a different driver. The driver on the return stretch did not speak to me. He would not engage in any small talk about the weather or the traffic. So we traveled in

silence. And then, when we arrived at my house, he took out my suitcase out of the trunk and left it there, not offering to carry it up the stairs for me. I am not sure if he didn't speak English very well, or perhaps was hard of hearing, but the lack of engagement made the taxi ride tedious and the driver's lack of attention was irritating.

Your experience matters

Having a friendly interchange makes a difference in how you feel about your experience. Think about when you go to a store and the clerk can't be bothered to help you. You probably just buy what you came for or you just walk out of the store. Then think about the store where you go in and you are greeted with a friendly smile and a "what can I help you find today?" You feel welcome, which may lead to you spending more time in the store or even buying more than you planned. Or when you go to a party, and the host greets you warmly and introduces you to others. Or when you are at a networking event, and someone smiles and comes over to speak to you. Or when you are traveling, and can't find an address until someone offers to show you the way.



Photo by Belle Co from Pexels

What is it to be friendly?

Friendliness is a positive attribute.

Merriam-Webster provides several definitions for the word “friendly,” among them:

showing kindly interest and goodwill

cheerful, comforting

serving a beneficial or helpful purpose

easy to use or understand

designed or intended to accommodate particular needs, users, etc.

What is friendly marketing?

Friendly marketing creates a better, more positive experience for your audience.

- Friendly marketing considers you (the audience/end users) its first priority.
- Friendly marketing makes things clear and easy to understand.
- Friendly marketing gives you the information you need to make a decision.

What's not friendly marketing?

Unfriendly marketing creates annoyance and frustration, and results in a negative experience for your audience.

- It's not friendly to overwhelm your audience with email marketing messages.
- It's not friendly to use jargon and hard to understand language.
- It's not friendly to make your website visitors struggle to find what they need.

Bottom line: Make it your marketing resolution for 2022 to be more friendly

People should understand

It seems obvious that your readers should understand whatever it is you are writing for them. But it only *seems* that way because too many writers, especially those who write legal documents, don't stop to think whether their readers will get it. I know this because I've attempted to read contracts and other legal documents. Although I understand most of the words, sometimes I can't fathom the meaning.

Do you speak medical jargon? I don't

Same goes for medical stuff. A few years ago, I had an MRI done. I got the report from the radiologist and try as I might, I couldn't make heads or tails of it. In this case, it was the vocabulary. I gave it to the doctor, and I told him that I didn't understand the report. This doctor, as is usual with any insider, gave me a look indicating he thought I must be very slow because it was obvious to him that this report said I had a torn rotator cuff. But it wasn't obvious to me. And it's not because I am slow. It's because the radiologist wrote this using medical jargon that I don't understand.

Plain language required

You'd think the plain language movement were new. It's not. In fact, government agencies are mandated to write in plain English since President Obama signed the Plain Writing Act in 2010. But the directive to make things clearer goes back to the 1970s (read the timeline at plainlanguage.gov).

But there are no such mandates for other industries. Sure, writing in plain language should be common sense and many businesses strive to make their writing clearer and more user friendly but others write (and speak) in industry jargon, making it hard for the average person to understand.

Of all the posts I've shared on LinkedIn, the following from

Bloomberg Law really struck a chord:

Use Plain Language in Contract—No One Wants Legalese

It was viewed hundreds of times and shared by many readers, making it my best performing post of all time.

Here's the bottom line: There's a real need for people to understand what you are writing. If you need help, there are some courses available online. You may find the "Oxford Guide to Plain English" by Martin Cutts helpful. Or you could hire someone like me to copy edit your documents with plain language in mind.

3 steps to clear customer communications

Clear communications provide accurate and up-to-date information. Being clear will help your audience know what is going on and what to expect from you. This requires making sure that you are not undermining your message by having different information in different places.

Pandemic challenges

The pandemic has created some macro communications challenges around vaccine hesitancy and public health measures and mandates. On a micro level, I've noticed issues for businesses and organizations in communications changes to their customers and patrons. One that keeps cropping up is mask wearing rules. In Montgomery County, Maryland, where I live, mask mandates were dropped in the late spring/early summer and then brought

back in early August in response to the Delta variant. These zig zag changes made it difficult for organizations to keep up. When the mask mandates went out, they changed certain webpages and email templates and when they came back, they may have not changed all their communications to reflect the new reality.

Take for example a yoga studio I go to which requires proof of vaccination for attendance. When you go to its website, it tells you that you can unmask because everyone will have shown their vaccine cards. But when you get your class enrollment confirmation email, you are instructed that you must mask up in class.

Is that your latest menu?

But it is not only around COVID and masks that we see different information from different sources from the same organization. It could be different hours of operation on a sign versus the website. Or a spring menu being listed on a restaurant's website when it's already fall.

Be accurate and consistent—here's how

You can make sure that your communications are accurate and consistent across all your channels. Following are the three steps you'll need to take.

Step 1: Create a trigger list

What kinds of things do you need to tell your audience about?

- *Changes (including updates) to:*

- Policies
- Staff/personnel
- Hours
- Location
- Dates

- *Additions*
 - For example, you've added new classes or staff members
- *Deletions*
 - Perhaps your pool is closed for the season, or you are no longer offering a product.

Step 2: Audit your communication platforms

You'll have to do an in-depth assessment of all the places you communicate with your customers, patrons, or donors. You want to know everywhere that people get information about you. While you are doing this, take the opportunity to make sure the information is consistent and updated. This includes (and is not limited to):

- Website (and remember to list ALL pages/areas of the website where information is listed). For example, you may have your hours listed on your homepage and then on your contact page.
- Email communications
- Signage
- Advertising and other marketing materials
- Staff (e.g., receptionist, information desk personnel, etc.)

Step 3: Create a checklist

Create a checklist that you follow whenever a trigger occurs. You may choose to make this very specific. If your organization changes board members every year, you would list it followed by the places you need to update, such as the website about us or leadership page, the organizational letterhead, signage in your office, and so forth. The checklist could be a Word or Excel document that is accessed each time one of your trigger list items occurs. You'll then have a systematic way to make sure that each of your communication platforms is updated at the same time.

Bottom line is that maintaining all your information updated, accurate and consistent keeps your customers and other patrons in the know.

Storytelling versus writing

I am a huge Scandi-noir fiction fan. Recently, I was reading (yet again) a mystery by an Icelandic author (in translation, of course). I noticed the writing was a bit stilted. Some of the phrases didn't sound right, and I can only imagine this was a translation/translator issue. Translating is hard work. You need to understand the language, obviously. And you also need to understand author's tone and intent so you can choose the best word or phrase when many will do. This is especially true with colloquial expressions that don't translate directly. And I am sure these colloquialisms, and some peculiarities of Icelandic culture didn't quite make it in the translation. And yet there was a blurb on the book jacket by an American crime author, praising the Icelandic author, saying she was a "magnificent writer." I doubt that the American read the work in the original Icelandic, so she had no way to judge the writing. What she was judging, and rightly so, was the *storytelling*.

Storytelling versus writing

Good storytelling is not the same as good writing, and neither is good writing also good storytelling. Writing and

storytelling are two different, albeit related, skills.

Good storytelling pulls you in. It makes you want to know more.

Good writing is about knowing how to use language and its mechanics to communicate ideas clearly.

Can you have one without the other? Yes, you can. And I would argue that the best stories are also the best written.



Photo by Yaroslav Shuraev from Pexels

Think about your favorite book

If you've ever read a book with an intriguing plot, but with utilitarian writing, you understand that storytelling is a skill separate from writing. Books written by good storytellers who are mediocre writers are readable because you are interested in the story and you want to know more.

If you've ever read a book that's so well written, where the words sing, but there is no discernible plot or the story being told is boring, chances are you stopped reading or read the book super slowly. Beautiful writing alone does not make a readable book.

And I would bet that your favorite books, the ones you recommend or perhaps even re-read, are the ones that have a great story and are well written.

Here's the bottom line for content writers

For those of us who write any sort of content, focusing on *what* we are trying to say should come first. Then, we should think about *how* to say it. If we get both these elements—storytelling and writing—done right, we'll create content worth reading.