Connecting to audiences through AI and user needs -
Lessons from the Financial Times and beyond

INMA, New York
1 March 2024
Insights from FT Strategies
Like many publishers, the FT has been accelerating efforts to integrate AI into more of our workflows, balancing speed and responsibility.

Generative AI exists because of the transformer

This is how it works

By Visual Storytelling Team and Madhumita Murgia in London SEPTEMBER 12 2023

Opinion Artificial intelligence

Letter from the editor on generative AI and the FT

Our journalism will continue to be reported, written and edited by humans who are the best in their fields

ROUL A KHALAF Add to myFT
At FT Strategies, we have a front row seat to this work; helping us guide our clients on their approach to AI and how they execute
AI has long been in the publisher toolkit but GenAI is accelerating us towards what we used to call ‘the future’

- **Existing**: AI is used to score and classify data
- **Present**: AI can process and generate long-form text inputs and outputs
- **Future?**: AI will autonomously execute multiple tasks in multiple formats

- This enables publishers to... process customer data more efficiently and predict outcomes (e.g. conversions, churn)
- This enables publishers to... increase efficiency of content production and develop adaptive customer experiences (e.g. new formats, personalised experiences)
- This enables publishers to... develop hyper-personal 'super apps' and increase managerial efficiency (e.g. new products, strategy planning)

*Note: this is not necessarily a linear path or implementation timeline*
As a result, the industry is facing existential questions about how to maximise the benefits of using AI whilst minimising the risks

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Changes to content production</th>
<th>Impact on efficiency</th>
<th>Evolving formats and user experience</th>
<th>Ethical considerations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● What aspects of content production should be automated vs. human-led?</td>
<td>● What are the potential cost savings associated with implementing AI?</td>
<td>● How can we use AI to enhance content localisation and personalisation?</td>
<td>● How will we ensure quality control and uphold editorial standards?</td>
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<td>● What aspects of reporting will be most valued by consumers?</td>
<td>● Where should we focus our investments?</td>
<td>● How can we leverage AI to deliver multimedia experiences?</td>
<td>● How will we mitigate the risk of biases emerging from the use of AI?</td>
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<td>● How will this impact the traditional role of reporters?</td>
<td>● How will we keep pace if AI continues to develop at extreme rates?</td>
<td>● How will consumers’ expectations evolve?</td>
<td>● How will we ensure good governance and effective oversight of AI usage?</td>
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Our research finds that most publishers are already experimenting with AI

The majority of publishers are already using or actively experimenting with AI in their organisations

Q: Are you currently using AI in your business?

- Yes, internal: 17.7%
- Yes, customer-facing: 7.7%
- Yes, both: 16.1%
- No: 18.0%
- Just experiments: 42.3%

An FTS survey of 1,000+ publishers found that ~42% of news media and publishing companies are actively using AI in internal or customer-facing processes while ~42% are experimenting

While publishers see the value in AI across several functions, content production is the most compelling use case

Q: Which AI use cases will most likely improve your performance?

- Internal Operations (e.g. coding efficiency): 16.67%
- Monetisation (e.g. dynamic paywall): 16.67%
- Audience Engagement (e.g. comment moderation): 32.14%
- Content Production (e.g. headline generation): 34.52%

Respondents believe there are opportunities for AI to improve performance across a range of different business areas, but ~35% believe content production is the biggest opportunity
Experimentation is a way to reduce uncertainty and keep up with the pace of AI innovation.

“(AI) is like surfing, you want to get out in the water, you want to get used to it, you want to get in that practice of running experiments regularly.”

Lucky Gunasekara
CEO, Miso.AI
In our work supporting news organisations, we use a guiding framework for AI use cases to identify where to drive adoption.

Using AI to optimise and innovate, ultimately leading to a more sustainable business.

- **MONETISATION**
  - Automated tagging
  - Headline generation
  - News gathering
  - Ideation
  - Copy-writing
  - Editing
  - Publishing
  - Translation
  - Interview transcription, Fact-checking

- **CONTENT PRODUCTION**
  - Content marketing
  - Social post automation
  - User segmentation
  - Comment moderation
  - Format personalisation
  - Recommendation engine
  - Audience analytics, Marketing automation, Generative search
  - UX

- **AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT**
  - Coding
  - Customer service chatbots
  - Internal communications

- **Operations**
  - Propensity modelling
  - Content licensing strategy
  - Lead generation / nurturing
  - Dynamic pricing
  - Dynamic paywall
  - Advertising (incl. predicting campaign effectiveness)

Note: Supported by capabilities including people and tech.
So far that work has revealed emerging threads; with most ideas focused on personalisation of content experiences

- **11% of publishers**
  - Using AI-based systems to segment subscribers and collect reader data to personalise advertising

- **33% of publishers**
  - Leveraging AI for headline generation, transcription, trend content tracking, style guide (e.g., wording/grammar)

- **39% of publishers**
  - Includes using AI to personalise content recommendations, content formats, newsletter personalisation and article converters (e.g., text-to-video formats for social media).

- **17% of publishers**
  - AI for internal search optimisation, sorting inbound breaking news, and internal budgeting tool
Lessons from the Financial Times
Where do you begin when, by the time you’ve started, the technology has moved on?

Machines “better” than humans with Deep Learning

Source: CFTE 2023
At the FT, we approach this challenge via a set of key questions

1. Can we use AI to understand the world better / do better journalism?

2. How do we use AI to amplify or accelerate the creation of value we sell?

3. How can AI benefit our employees? e.g. distribution of knowledge
Semantic search at the FT leverages AI to provide more relevant results for readers’ search queries

**The Situation**

Feedback from readers showed they were missing out on articles and they wanted to access information as quickly as possible.

Internal research shows that users typically shift between passively reading articles (serendipitous discovery) and seeking answers to their questions - the ‘deep-dive’ phase.

**The Initiative**

- **Semantic search** was introduced to help readers find specific information they need more easily.
- Semantic search provides readers with a search tool that is **versatile, relevant and useful**.

**The Outcome**

Source: FT

*How FT’s semantic search works*
Example: The FT’s Semantic Search leverages AI to provide more relevant results for search queries [internal experiment]

Source: FT
The Financial Times launched FT Definitions that aim to increase engagement among students

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<th>The Initiative</th>
<th>The Outcome</th>
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<td><strong>FINANCIAL TIMES</strong></td>
<td>The Financial Times built FT Definitions - a new feature that will provide explanations of terminology and jargon inside the FT article</td>
<td>The A/B tests conducted yielded the following results:</td>
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<td>Research shows that FT content is valuable for students, but students mentioned that it is not written in an accessible way</td>
<td>An initial set of 200 definitions were manually created and A/B tested to validate the user need</td>
<td>FT Definitions increased avg. quality reads and avg. counted content per student by approximately 3%</td>
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<td>The FT’s content is editorially created and reviewed, and some explainer content can be repurposed to make otherwise jargon-heavy content more easy to understand</td>
<td>With the need and value proven, an LLM leveraging historic content and editorial guardrails may be able to generate definitions at scale</td>
<td>Students who clicked at least on one definition were even more engaged with 200% more ‘quality reads’ and ‘counted content’ (views)</td>
</tr>
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Source: FT
Users who connect to their car via a cable or Bluetooth will see the FT Audio app on their car screen.

In this MVP, users have the option to select between 'Top Stories' (featured on home page) or 'Latest podcasts'. Once they make their selection, they will arrive on a page with a list of all items to play.

Tapping on these, will play the item and a player screen will load:
Introduction to Smartocto’s user needs model 2.0

Note: Supported by capabilities including people and tech
Update me articles highlighted a huge misalignment between outsized output and audience needs.

- Overproduction of Update Me articles (70% of total output) not matched by percentage of actual reads by user need.
- Newsroom not producing content users actually needed or wanted.
There are four main considerations for applying user needs for covering news and media content

1. 'Hard' news is not enough to attract people regularly or with sufficient engagement.

2. Commoditised, 'agenda' news are everywhere, relevancy and engagement become the differentiator.

3. There is misalignment between what audience wants in digital and what it currently gets from media outlets. *(they desire information, but also understanding, inspiration, utility, fun)*

4. Growth comes when different user needs are addressed consistently, creatively and strategically.
Prior to the user needs model being introduced, there was a below average CPI for newly published articles.
Following the introduction of the user needs model, the newsroom saw great success in improving daily average CPI for newly published articles.
Example 1: User needs stories to ‘educate’

Wolves do not harm humans, but another danger for humans lurks in the forests of Brabant.

De wolf is terug en waart zich voortaan in de Brabantse bossen. Waar schapen al tientallen keren slachtoffer werden van het roofdier, is de kans dat je als mens de wolf vaak ziet voorbij de ondiepe herinnering van wat de films ons leerden over de jacht van de wolven. In Brabant zijn er geen populaties van deze roofdieren meer, maar wel vrijwel zeker wel wolven die weer in de omgeving van de mens kunnen worden aantroffen. (…)
Example 2: User needs stories to ‘inspire’

That’s how contradictory the corona measures are: A day in the life of Jan and Marieke

De aangescherpte coronamaatregelen en afwijkende regels per veiligheidsregio zorgen voor verwarring. Want wat mag nou wel, en wat niet? We schetsen een dag in het leven van de fictieve Jan en Marieke, die zich een woensdag lang zo nooit

Inspire me
Example 3: User needs stories to ‘give me perspective’

12.5 million euros stored in ‘Uncle Scrooge’s’ cash box, resident faces long jail term, prosecutors say
Quadrant analysis showed how user needs tagged articles were performing...

Quadrant analysis

— Filter your articles and find out which articles to distribute more (left top quadrant) and which to enrich (right bottom quadrant). Find the patterns, and check your content strategy.

Engagement

Niche

Pure win

Sub Standard

Reach Champions

Exposure

Type of analysis:

CPI Exposure vs CPI Engagement

Number of articles per quadrant:

10 25 50 100 2000 3000 4000 5000

CPI Exposure

CPI Engagement

Sub standard

Reach Champions

Section: User Needs: Help me mijn mening te vormen

Section: User Needs: Help me verder

Section: User Needs: Hou me op de hoogte

Section: User Needs: Inspirer me

Section: User Needs: Keep me on trend

Section: User Needs: Leer me iets nieuws

Section: User Needs: Lat me af

Section: User Needs: Roer en verbind me
...And identified which needed to be distributed more, or enriched
The analysis provided notifications on ways to distribute articles that have the potential to perform better...

- This story qualifies best for your newsletter today! Put it on top!
- This story attracts a large audience on Facebook, but you haven’t posted it yet.
- There’s not enough premium content on your homepage... perhaps this story qualifies.
- This story is doing great on social but performs poorly on your website. Run an AB-test on the headline.
...As well as guidance on articles that need to be enriched as they are performing well

This video in the story is doing really well, do we have additional footage to keep the audience engaged?

This old story is still getting lots of attention, consider writing an update?

This news story is still attracting a large audience, creating a ‘give me perspective’ follow up will be beneficial.

enriching content user needs
SmartOcto’s AI solution allows us to set a north star metric for each article
It also provides headline suggestions taking the north star into account.
Man reed fietser aan en liet hen zwaargewond achter: cel dreigt


Geschreven door
Hans Janssen

Advice
To make the text more emotional, more personal details and experiences of the victims can be added. For example, how they experienced the collision and how the accident affected their lives. Quotes from family members or friends can also create more emotion. Furthermore, the writing style can be made more lively and compelling by using more colorful descriptions and metaphors.

To help you out, let smartocto AI give you some examples here:
For example: instead of stating that the victims were 'seriously injured', it can be described more concretely what injuries they suffered and how their recovery is progressing. Or details can be given about how the accident has changed their daily lives, such as whether they can still do their work. Quotes from loved ones telling how much they suffered from what happened can strengthen the emotional impact.
Metaphors such as 'their lives were in ruins after the collision' can also help make the tragedy tangible for the reader.

Learn more about:
user need: emotion driven
The adoption of the user needs framework, and AI-enabled content optimisation, has driven increased attention time, loyal visitors and CPI.
Supercharge your content strategy with User Needs Labs, a comprehensive programme from FT Strategies & smartocto

→ **Content research**: the analysis of one thousand articles followed by the implementation of 'growth hacks'

→ **User needs-driven strategy**: an explanation and training in the quadrant model, the creation of unique dashboards, and the evaluation of the outcomes of the 'growth hacks'

→ **User needs reporting**: customised and automised dashboards and reports, based on a thorough analysis of collected data

→ **Workflow integration**: newsrooms will receive practical guidance on how to seamlessly integrate the user needs approach into their daily workflow

→ **€2000 worth of credits for smartocto.ai**
Thank you

Any questions?

User Needs Labs

Designed to supercharge your content strategy and drive audience growth

ftstrategies.com/user-needs
Graveyard