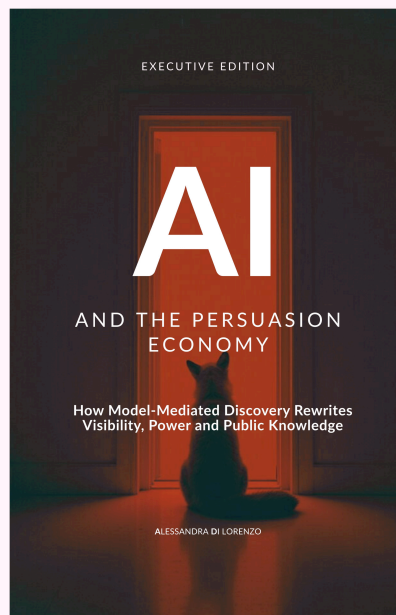


AI & THE PERSUASION ECONOMY

EXECUTIVE ESSAY

FROM THE AUTHOR OF THE
AMAZON BEST SELLER, ADJUST

Alessandra Di Lorenzo
thisisadjust.com



Copyright © 2025 Alessandra Di Lorenzo

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without the publisher's prior written permission.

This essay was written as a companion to ADJUST. While ADJUST explored how advertising and attention systems shape our choices, this looks at how AI is reshaping those systems themselves. It is intended as a strategic primer for educators, policymakers and professionals navigating this inflexion point.

Table of Contents

Introduction: The Shift No One Is Prepared For

Part I: Shifting Infrastructure

Part II: Industry Under Pressure

Part III: The Epistemic Challenge

Part IV — Navigating the Transition

Conclusion: A New Persuasion Infrastructure

Introduction: The Shift No One Is Prepared For

For two decades, the digital world has operated through a familiar choreography. We searched, clicked, compared options, and, in doing so, sustained an entire advertising and content economy. Brands learned to compete for visibility; publishers learned to capture traffic; platforms built immense power by mediating these exchanges. It wasn't perfect, but it was legible and above all, human in scale and logic.

Generative AI unsettles this foundation in ways that feel far more significant than the industry rhetoric around automation or efficiency. Its real disruption lies in its quiet insertion of a new layer between people and information.

Large language models increasingly answer before we click, summarise before we explore, and decide what we see before we realise alternative possibilities existed. This new model-mediated layer is largely invisible to the user. Still, it is already reshaping how information is discovered, how content creators are rewarded, and which voices remain part of the public sphere. Working inside this transition, I see the effects daily. Teams that once understood the rules of digital visibility now find those rules evaporating beneath their feet. Organisations are required to adapt at a cultural and strategic pace that far exceeds the speed of their technical change. The transformation is architectural, fast-moving and, in many ways, still unacknowledged. This essay reflects what I am witnessing across the industry — with brands, publishers, ad tech providers, agencies, leaders and

institutions — as a system we thought we understood reorganises itself around a new centre of gravity.

Part I: Shifting Infrastructure

1. From platforms to models

For years, digital dominance followed a recognisable pattern: the more scale a platform accumulated, the more data it captured; the more data it captured, the stronger its market position became; the stronger its position, the harder it became for others to compete. These dynamics haven't disappeared, but generative AI introduces something distinct that sits above them.

Large language models are fast becoming the new entry point for information. They determine what is retrieved, how it is framed, and which sources are included or excluded before a user ever reaches a website. This does not eliminate platform logic but reframes it within a system where the first layer of discovery is model-driven rather than link-driven. The locus of dominance shifts upstream, into a layer that is probabilistic, opaque and only partially visible to those who depend upon it.

2. When answers replace clicks

Traditional search rested on an implicit economic contract: a search engine returned relevant results, users clicked through to the open web, and the attention generated there funded the content ecosystem through advertising. That chain is breaking. When AI tools return fully formed answers rather than directing people onwards, the flow of value fails to reach the originators of information. Traffic declines, monetisation weakens, and the incentive to create content begins to erode.

This is not a theoretical scenario, it is already happening. Multiple industry analyses show organic traffic to publishers has fallen since AI-generated summaries were introduced into search results, as more queries produce answers directly in the search experience without links to sources. For example, data from Digital Content Next member publishers indicates that referral traffic from Google Search declined by around 10% overall over a recent eight-week period, with non-news brands seeing drops of around 14% and news brands down around 7%, trends that publishers directly link to the rollout of AI Overviews. ([Digiday](#))

Other research shows that AI Overviews have reduced click-through rates by an average of 34.5% on top-ranking pages. In some cases, sites that previously ranked first have seen traffic cut dramatically when results appear below an AI summary. ([EMARKETER](#)). Additionally, zero-click search results have become much more common, increasing from about 56% to nearly 69% of queries for some types of informational searches, meaning users often get answers without ever clicking through to publisher sites. ([Digiday](#)),

Over the same period, reports show that total organic traffic to news sites fell from roughly 2.3 billion visits to under 1.7 billion as zero-click behaviour rose, illustrating how these shifts can translate into material losses for large segments of the open web ([Human Made](#)). What begins as a decline in clicks quickly becomes a structural weakness: fewer visits mean fewer ad impressions and weaker monetisation, which in turn erodes the resources available to produce new, high-quality content and contributes to a thinning of the information ecosystem itself.

3. The new information divide

A further shift is emerging that is easy to overlook but deeply consequential. People with expertise, curiosity or professional obligations will continue to seek out sources. But for most, the model's summary becomes the experience itself: a compressed, smoothed and decontextualised version of the information it draws on. Over time, this creates *a new form of information polarisation* in which depth becomes an active choice while simplification becomes the default mode of understanding.

This divide is not driven by individual preference or effort; it is produced by architectural design. When models become the gateway to most information, the cognitive path of least resistance leads users toward synthetic overviews rather than the underlying material. Nuance requires intent. Context requires friction. Contradiction requires exposure. Yet models are built to reduce friction, resolve ambiguity and collapse complexity into a single coherent output. The very qualities that make them efficient also make them epistemically flattening.

The result is an informational environment in which what people know depends less on their curiosity and more on what the system decides to surface, compress or omit. Those who step beyond the summary encounter a plurality of perspectives; those who remain within the model's output receive a distilled version of reality whose boundaries they cannot see. This asymmetry matters. It shifts the conditions under which democratic deliberation occurs: if nuance is more complex to encounter, it becomes easier for public reasoning to thin, for consensus to be manufactured, and for complex issues to be understood only at their most superficial layer.

“ The result is an informational environment in which what people know depends less on their curiosity and more on what the system decides to surface, compress or omit ”

Part II: Industry Under Pressure

1. Advertising's broken logic

Advertising has always assigned economic value to visibility. Brands paid to be noticed; platforms monetised the competition for attention. But when discovery begins inside a model, the mechanisms that previously governed visibility become less predictable. Search demand fragments, attribution breaks, and the inputs that shape ranking evolve from user-driven signals to model-driven interpretations. Brand narratives no longer begin with human intention but with how a model represents the brand based on its training data.

This raises a new strategic question: how do brands influence a system that intermediates discovery before the user ever reaches them?

The persuasion economy shifts from winning attention within platforms to shaping the informational context that platforms — and now models — draw from.

“ The persuasion economy shifts from winning attention within platforms to shaping the informational context that platforms and models draw from. ”

2. Authorship under pressure

Generative AI also blurs the boundary between human-created and machine-created content. In practice, the distinction becomes less relevant than the economic consequences: synthetic content competes with human work not only in volume but in visibility. As models remix and regenerate existing material, originality becomes harder to maintain, attribution becomes less visible, and the market begins to reward the characteristics that models preferentially ingest rather than the traits that humans value.

The result is a drift toward homogenisation. Content becomes less about insight and more about pattern compatibility, legibility to the machine rather than meaning to the reader.

3. Leadership inside the transition

Inside organisations, the emotional and cultural impact of this shift is substantial. Leaders are caught between heightened expectations and limited clarity. Boards are eager to automate; teams worry about their relevance; and the tools themselves evolve faster than workflows, governance structures or organisational culture can absorb.

Much of my work involves helping leaders navigate this tension: guiding teams through uncertainty, re-establishing focus, and creating clarity in an environment where hype often outruns capability. This is not merely a technical transformation; it is a human one, and the pace at which it unfolds can be disorienting.

Part III: The Epistemic Challenge

1. The epistemic challenge

When information retrieval becomes model-mediated, the relationship between users and truth changes. Sources become abstracted; provenance becomes harder to trace; and the distinction between verified information and statistically plausible synthesis becomes increasingly porous. AI-generated responses can blend fact and error with equal confidence, creating an environment where users may no longer understand why a particular answer was surfaced or how reliable it is.

Trust shifts from institutions to interfaces — from known authors and publishers to probabilistic systems whose internal logic remains largely inaccessible.

“ When information retrieval becomes model-mediated, the relationship between users and truth changes ”

2. AI as an upstream gatekeeper

As models determine what is surfaced, summarised or excluded, they become a new kind of gatekeeper: non-human, opaque, and optimised for objectives that do not always align with human or civic needs. Their tendency to summarise rather than direct attention deprives the open web of the economic flows it requires to sustain itself. When fewer sources survive, models train on a narrower set of inputs; this in turn yields narrower outputs, which further shrink the informational landscape. A feedback loop begins: collapsing visibility reinforces collapsing diversity. This is not simply a market failure: it is a democratic one.

3. The societal risk

Information ecosystems degrade quietly. First, through convenience; then, through consolidation; and finally, through dependence. As AI-mediated discovery becomes the norm, public understanding risks being shaped not by the plurality of available perspectives but by the constraints and optimisation logic of the systems mediating them.

In such an environment, the danger is not only misinformation but mis-distribution: a world in which some groups have access to depth. In contrast, others receive only distillations, and public reasoning thins, as nuance becomes harder to encounter.

Part IV: Navigating the Transition

The organisations responding most effectively to this shift are those willing to confront a simple but uncomfortable truth: the rules they mastered over the past decade no longer govern the terrain on which they operate today. Discovery is moving upstream into systems that behave differently from the platforms that leaders once understood, and the instinctive responses — produce more, buy more, optimise more — no longer deliver the visibility they once did.

The implications differ across the ecosystem, but they are deeply interconnected. What matters now is not volume but legibility. Models need to understand brands, content, and websites before a human ever encounters them. Signals must be coherent, structured, and grounded in provenance. Organisations that express themselves in ways that models can reliably interpret will see their visibility amplified; those that continue to optimise for yesterday's systems risk becoming invisible within tomorrow's systems.

One of the most evident signs of this architectural shift is the changing role of the website. For nearly two decades, the website was the primary destination of digital journeys, the place where discovery happened. Today, it serves another purpose: the authoritative reference against which a model infers identity. It no longer serves as the starting point but as the verification layer that stabilises meaning. The website is still essential, but as a truth-anchor rather than a traffic engine. In a world where the first impression is model-generated, the website becomes the source of facts, definitions and coherence, the raw material from which visibility is constructed upstream.

For brands

The challenge lies in identity and interpretation. Brands spent years optimising for algorithms they could observe — bidding strategies, metadata, content taxonomies. In a model-mediated environment, their first impression is increasingly generated by a system they do not control. Their visibility depends less on “content volume” and more on the clarity, distinctiveness and structural coherence of what they publish. The website becomes not a gateway but a reference point — the canonical source against which a model infers who they are. Brands that fail to express themselves in ways that models can reliably understand risk fading into statistical averages: present everywhere, recognised nowhere.

For publishers

The disruption is existential. Their traditional contract with the open web — create quality content, earn traffic, monetise attention — weakens when models summarise rather than send. The value chain collapses upstream. To survive, publishers must shift from competing for clicks to competing for authority, membership, licensing relevance and narrative depth. Their future depends on producing content that cannot be flattened into generic synthesis: nuance, expertise, investigation, perspective. Those able to assert an identity that resists homogenisation will retain power in a world where most content becomes fodder for summary.

For ad-tech

The consequences cut even deeper. Entire categories of optimisation — the mechanics of bidding, attribution modelling, funnel orchestration — rest on assumptions about user journeys that may no longer exist. If discovery happens before the click, the click is no longer the unit of truth. Measurement becomes an act of inference rather than observation. The tools ad-tech built for an open-web economy must now adapt to a world where the first moment of influence is invisible, probabilistic and mediated by systems they do not operate. Their relevance will depend on shifting from last-mile optimisation to upstream understanding and deep signal capture.

For agencies

The centre of gravity moves from execution to interpretation. The question is no longer “How do we reach people?” but “How do we understand the systems that reach them first?” Agencies will need to develop new literacies: how models retrieve information, what constitutes brand coherence in a post-click world, and how to influence the informational context in which creative work is later encountered. The most valuable agencies will be those able to bridge cultural insight, technical understanding and strategic clarity — not by producing more assets, but by shaping the informational terrain in which those assets are interpreted.

Across all these sectors, one theme emerges: what matters now is not volume but legibility. Models need to understand an organisation before a person ever encounters it. Signals must be cleaner; language more deliberate; identity more grounded. The organisations that adapt quickest will be those who understand that the work of communication now begins upstream, at the level of systems rather than screens.

And yet the implications extend beyond industry. A society that relies on model-mediated discovery must develop more robust civic protections: transparency around how information is ranked and summarised, renewed support for public-interest media, and literacy that helps citizens understand not only how to use AI tools but how those tools shape what they see. If discovery is delegated to models, then understanding those models becomes a democratic necessity. We are, in other words, entering a period where agency must be rebuilt at multiple levels: organisations reclaiming the clarity of their signals; industries redefining their economic logic; and societies learning how to protect plurality, accountability and human judgement in an environment designed for speed rather than depth. The choices made now will determine not only who thrives commercially but also which ideas and voices survive in the public sphere.

“

The choices made now will determine not only who thrives commercially but also which ideas and voices survive in the public sphere.

”

Conclusion: A New Persuasion Infrastructure

Generative AI is reshaping the architecture of discovery, not at the margins but at the centre. It creates a new persuasion infrastructure in which systems, rather than institutions or individuals, determine what people see, trust and understand about the world. Persuasion, once shaped by competition for attention, is now shaped by the architecture that determines which information enters the field of view. It redistributes power upward, alters the economics of content production, and creates new forms of information polarisation that challenge how societies learn, deliberate and decide.

This is not a future problem; it is already happening. And while the technology will continue to evolve, the deeper question remains constant: how do we preserve plurality, context and human judgement in an environment where models mediate attention?

What makes this moment particularly complex is that the shift is architectural rather than cosmetic. We are not tweaking an interface or rebalancing a business model; we are re-designing the entry points to information itself. And once those entry points change, everything downstream begins to behave differently — from how organisations communicate, to how public debate forms, to how individuals come to understand the world around them.

The challenge, then, is not only to adapt systems but to defend capabilities: our ability to encounter multiple perspectives, to interrogate sources, to distinguish between simplification and truth. In a model-mediated world, the risk is not merely misinformation but mis-distribution — a quiet sorting of society into those with access to depth and those offered only distilled, synthetic overviews. This is where the informational divide becomes a civic one.

Yet this transition also presents an opportunity. If we understand how models mediate discovery, we can design for it. We can build clearer signals, stronger sources, and more resilient content ecosystems. We can invest in public-interest media, transparency standards, and literacy frameworks that help people understand the systems shaping their lives. And within organisations, we can cultivate leadership that is capable of absorbing ambiguity, steering through hype, and grounding decisions in judgement rather than automation.

The work ahead is not to resist the technology but to shape the conditions under which it becomes part of our informational life. That means asking not only what models produce, but what they privilege; not only whether they are accurate, but whose voices they amplify; not only how they summarise the world, but what they leave out.

This essay offers a practitioner's view from inside that transition — one grounded in the realities organisations face today and in the broader implications for the information ecosystems we all rely on. The stakes extend far beyond industry. They reach into the foundations of public knowledge and democratic life, where our collective ability to reason, choose and participate depends on the diversity, transparency and integrity of the information we can access.

If the architecture of discovery is being rebuilt, so too must our commitments to the values it serves. The future of the open web, of informed citizenship, and of shared reality hinges on whether we recognise this shift not as a technical upgrade but as a societal turning point and respond with the seriousness it demands.