
Four Scenarios for Scholarly Publishing and Generative AI

ALPSP University Press Redux Conference, 18 March 2026
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Owning My Imposter Syndrome

- I spent more than twenty years in trade bookselling and publishing before moving into strategy work around artificial intelligence. I now advise organisations across media and technology on how AI is changing their industries, write a newsletter and am publishing a book.
- I also sit on the boards of a university press and a scientific publisher, and advise a major publishing trade association. That means I encounter both the internal realities of scholarly publishing and the wider technology landscape.
- My aim today is not to explain scholarly publishing to you. It is to step back and examine the technology and information environment around it, because that environment is changing quickly.
- Whatever else, this is a personal perspective.

The Signals are Visible

- Generative AI: unease, ubiquity, utility: “almost universal” (HEPI/Kortext 2026)
- AI and research: volume, velocity (Gunitsky, Kutsov)
- AI is being integrated earlier into the research process: e.g. OpenAI Prism (*training on process not output*)
- Publishers are beginning to integrate content repositories into existing AI environments in ways that allow them to maintain control: e.g. John Wiley/Anthropic MCP, JSTOR Conversational Discovery in ChatGPT
- At the same time, discovery is increasingly happening inside conversational interfaces rather than traditional search systems
- LBF: content licensing deals, but longer-term uncertainty re copyright, Fair Use and Open Access

The Deeper Question

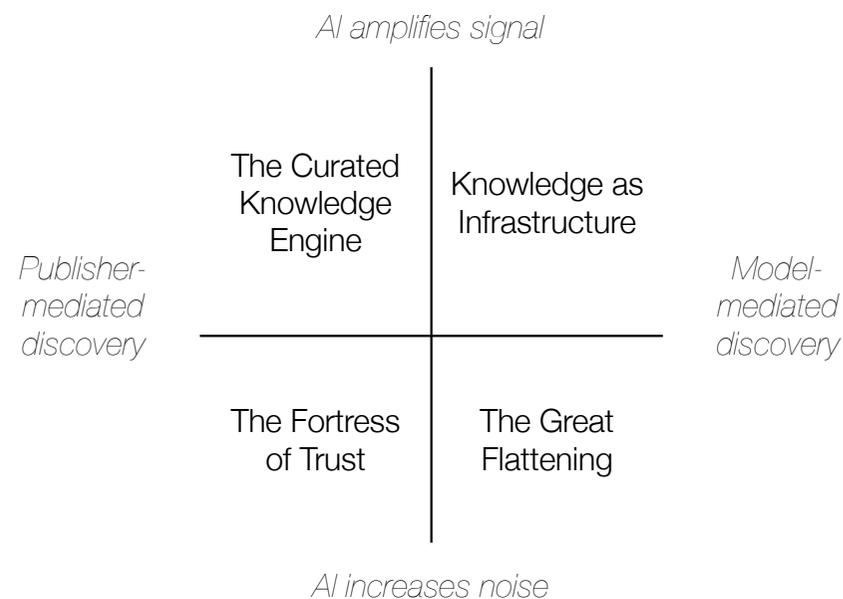
- The immediate question facing publishers is often framed as “how should we use AI in our workflows?” or “what should our author policy look like?” Those questions matter, but they are not the most important one.
- The deeper question is what happens when AI reshapes both how knowledge is produced and how knowledge is discovered at the same time. Those changes affect the structure of the entire information ecosystem.
- When the future contains this level of uncertainty, one useful tool is scenario planning. Scenarios do not predict the future, but they help organisations think more clearly about the range of possible outcomes.

Two Critical Uncertainties

- The first uncertainty concerns where discovery happens. Will researchers continue to work primarily within specialist, publisher and library environments, or will discovery increasingly occur through general AI assistants and agents? Is your content a discrete entity or tokens in a model? Copyright environment, Open Access as key variables.
- The second uncertainty concerns the effect of AI on the knowledge ecosystem itself. Will AI amplify signal by improving synthesis and analysis, or will it overwhelm existing filtering mechanisms with sheer volume?
- All of the above are plausible outcomes. AI may improve scientific capability while simultaneously generating unprecedented quantities of content, making the balance between signal and noise a genuine strategic question.

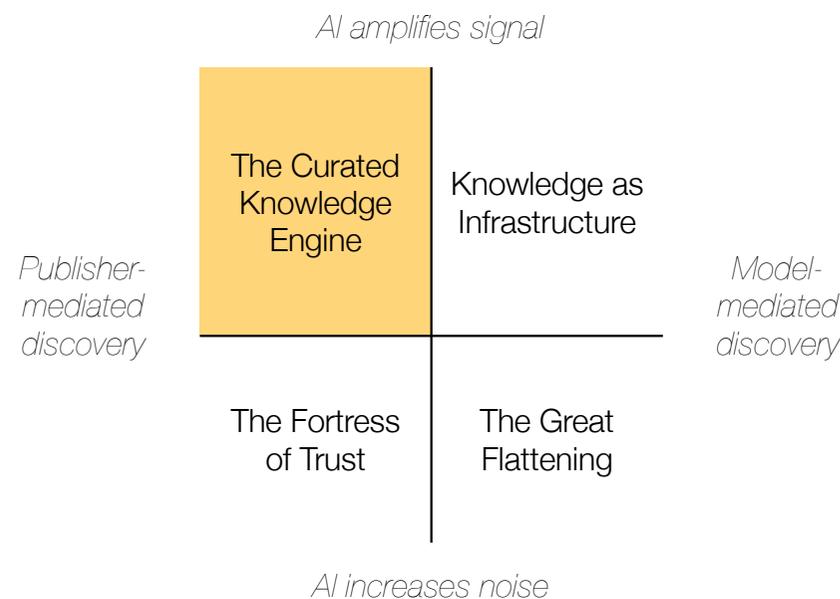
The Scenario Matrix

- Combining these two uncertainties produces four plausible futures. Each represents a different way the scholarly communication system might evolve as AI becomes embedded in research workflows.
- The real world will not fit neatly into one quadrant. Different disciplines, products, and publishing models may occupy different parts of the matrix simultaneously.
- **The purpose of the matrix is not prediction.** It is to provide a framework that helps organisations stress-test strategy under uncertainty.



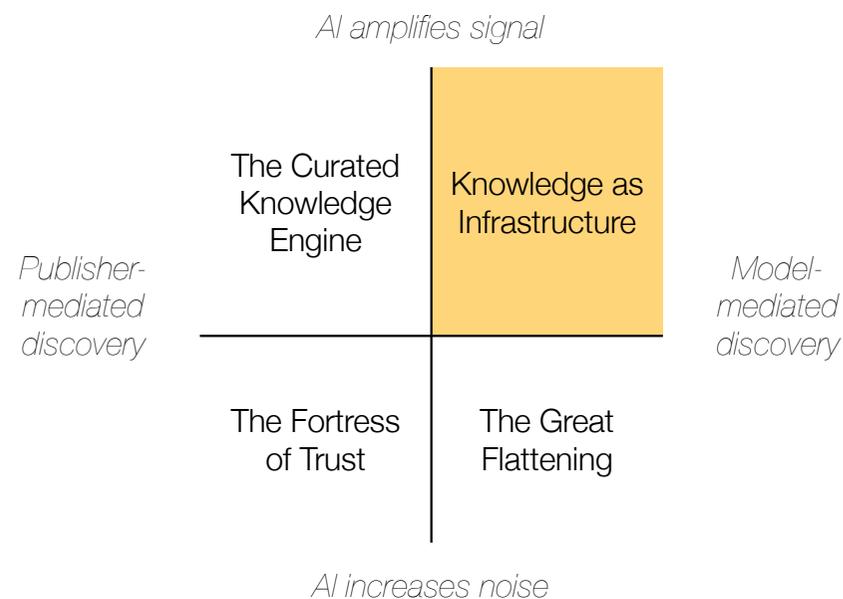
Scenario 1: The Curated Knowledge Engine

- *Publisher-mediated discovery + AI amplifies signal*
- Scholars continue to work primarily within trusted environments. AI tools embedded within these systems improve literature discovery, synthesis, and cross-disciplinary exploration.
- Platforms evolve into sophisticated research environments rather than simple content repositories. AI helps researchers navigate and interpret knowledge rather than simply retrieve documents.
- In this world presses become stronger product and licensing organisations, investing in workflow tools, discovery infrastructure, user experience and partnerships.



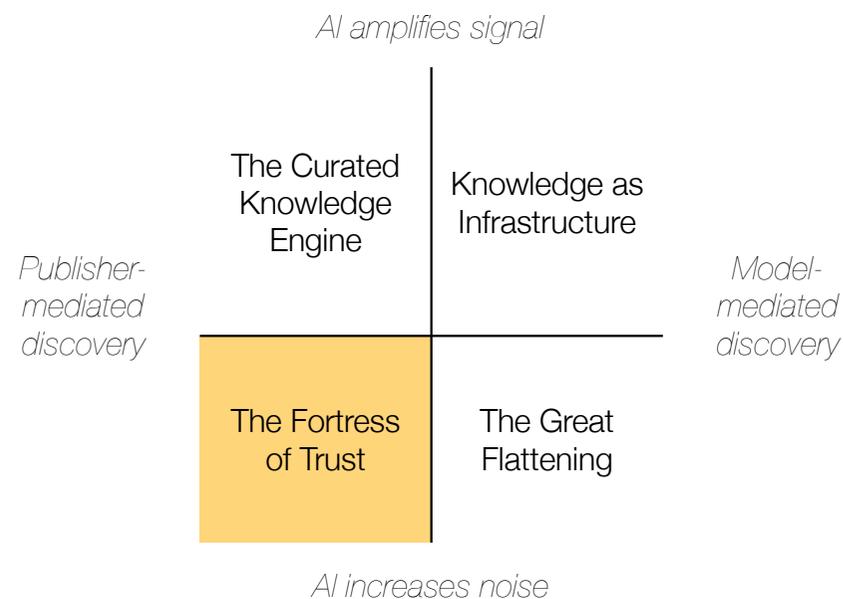
Scenario 2: Knowledge as Infrastructure

- *Model-mediated discovery + AI amplifies signal*
- Discovery increasingly happens inside general AI assistants rather than publisher platforms. Researchers ask questions and receive synthesized answers drawn from multiple sources.
- High-quality scholarly content becomes essential infrastructure for these systems. AI models depend on authoritative research to produce reliable outputs. But sourced how?
- The economic value of trusted content increases because AI systems rely on it for accurate synthesis, but what happens to the publisher brand?



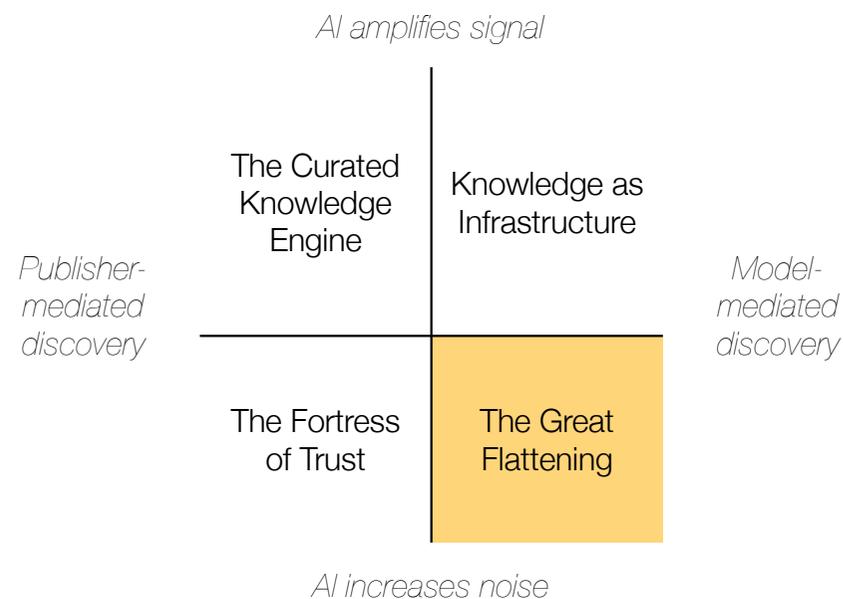
Scenario 3: The Fortress of Trust

- *Publisher-mediated discovery + AI increases noise*
- AI dramatically increases the volume of information in the ecosystem, creating significant noise and making filtering more difficult.
- In response, scholars rely more heavily on trusted editorial environments where content has been reviewed, curated, and validated.
- Publishers become increasingly valuable as institutions that provide credibility, provenance, and strong editorial judgement.



Scenario 4: The Great Flattening

- *Model-mediated discovery + AI increases noise*
- Discovery and synthesis occur primarily inside general AI assistants rather than publisher platforms. Researchers interact with answers rather than publications.
- AI systems aggregate information from multiple sources and present it as unified responses. Attribution becomes weaker and distinctions between publishers become less visible.
- In this world publishers risk becoming interchangeable content suppliers unless they control assets that remain scarce and defensible.



Core Questions

- **Where discovery begins?**
 - Inside publisher environments → brand, UX, workflow matter
 - Inside general AI assistants → distribution, licensing or other access, visibility matter
 - But is AI a given?
- **What gets monetised?**
 - Access to platforms (products, subscriptions)
 - Access to content (licensing, infrastructure)
 - Trust and validation (editorial authority, provenance)
- **What capabilities are essential?**
 - Peer review, demonstrable research integrity and validation systems
 - Product and workflow design
 - Machine-readable rights and metadata
 - Community and disciplinary relationships
- **The strategy shifts depending on the quadrant—but the questions are consistent.**

What Scholarly Publishing Offers

- Artificial intelligence will reshape the research ecosystem in ways we cannot fully predict.
- AI systems can generate text, summarise research, and retrieve information at extraordinary speed. These capabilities will continue to improve.
- What AI cannot provide is judgement: deciding which research deserves trust, attention, and preservation.
- University presses exist to exercise exactly this kind of judgement on behalf of scholarly communities. *But that judgement only has long-term value if it is visible, legible, and usable inside AI-mediated systems.*

Thank you
Questions?

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