The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Audio Publishing

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George Walkley
Outside Context

What do we mean by Artificial Intelligence?

A creator of narratives

A tool to improve the efficiency and cost of the audiobook production process

A solution to the number of existing literary works not available in the audiobook format

An opportunity to offer audiobooks in every language

A threat to the livelihoods of human narrators

A channel for listeners to discover new audiobooks

A lever for dominant technology platforms to lock in their market position

Or all of the above, all at once—
if so, how do we make sense of it?

Perspective

As a listener (1977—)

As a bookseller and publisher (1997—)

As an AI expert (2017—)

As a consultant and investor (2020—)

As an author (2026—)

Whatever the lens, *this is a personal view*
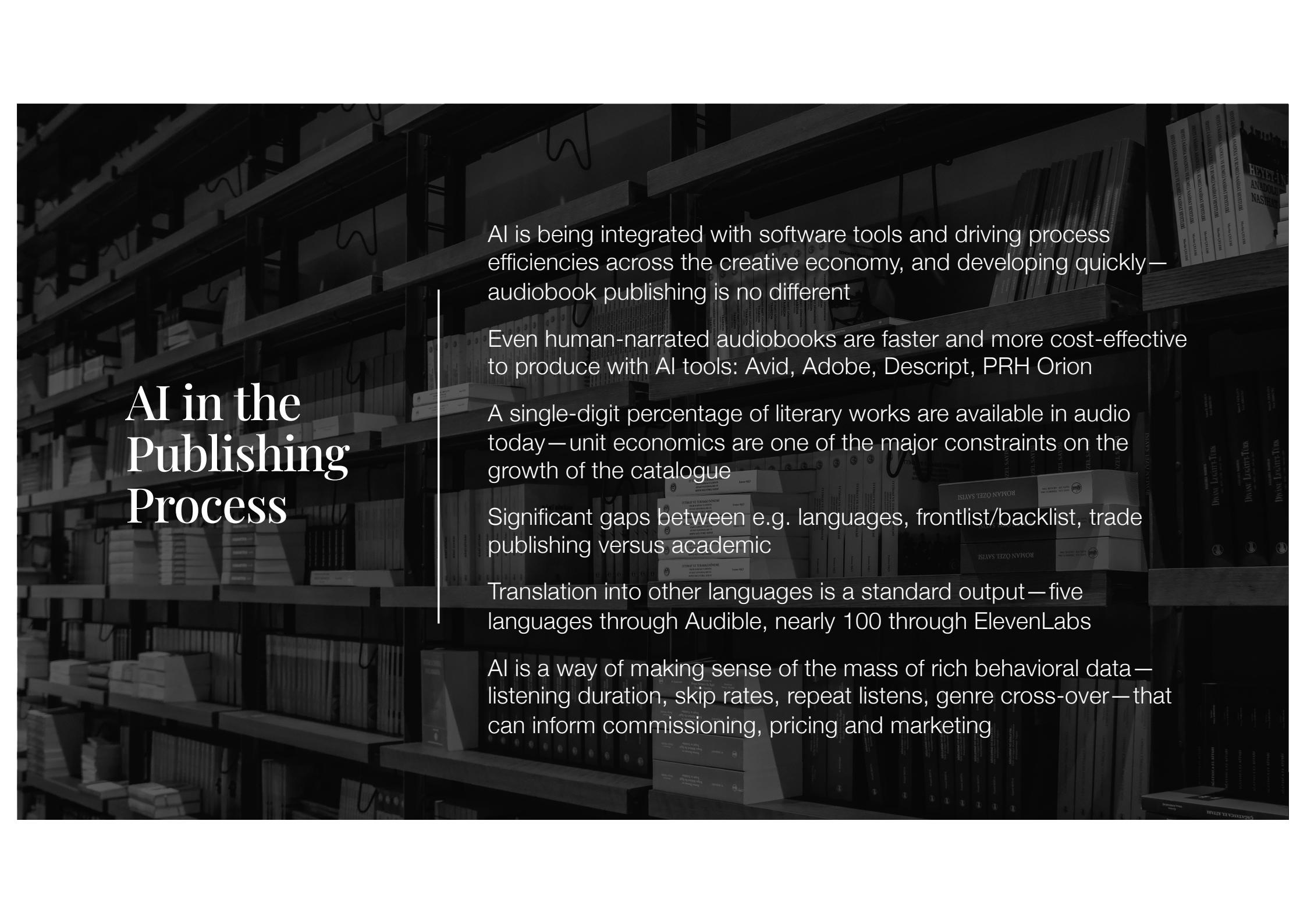
AI and the Creative Process

Authors are already using AI to plan, research, structure and refine their books—and in some cases, to write them (Coral Hart)

The manuscript arriving at the publisher is increasingly AI-mediated before a word is recorded

For audiobook publishers, this matters: the volume of published books increased by at least a factor of three from 2022-25 (NBER)

Comparison with podcast market: Inception Point AI producing 3,000 episodes *per week*

There was a gap between published books and available audiobooks even before this—absent the use of AI in the process, the gap will increase

AI in the Publishing Process

AI is being integrated with software tools and driving process efficiencies across the creative economy, and developing quickly—audiobook publishing is no different

Even human-narrated audiobooks are faster and more cost-effective to produce with AI tools: Avid, Adobe, Descript, PRH Orion

A single-digit percentage of literary works are available in audio today—unit economics are one of the major constraints on the growth of the catalogue

Significant gaps between e.g. languages, frontlist/backlist, trade publishing versus academic

Translation into other languages is a standard output—five languages through Audible, nearly 100 through ElevenLabs

AI is a way of making sense of the mass of rich behavioral data—listening duration, skip rates, repeat listens, genre cross-over—that can inform commissioning, pricing and marketing
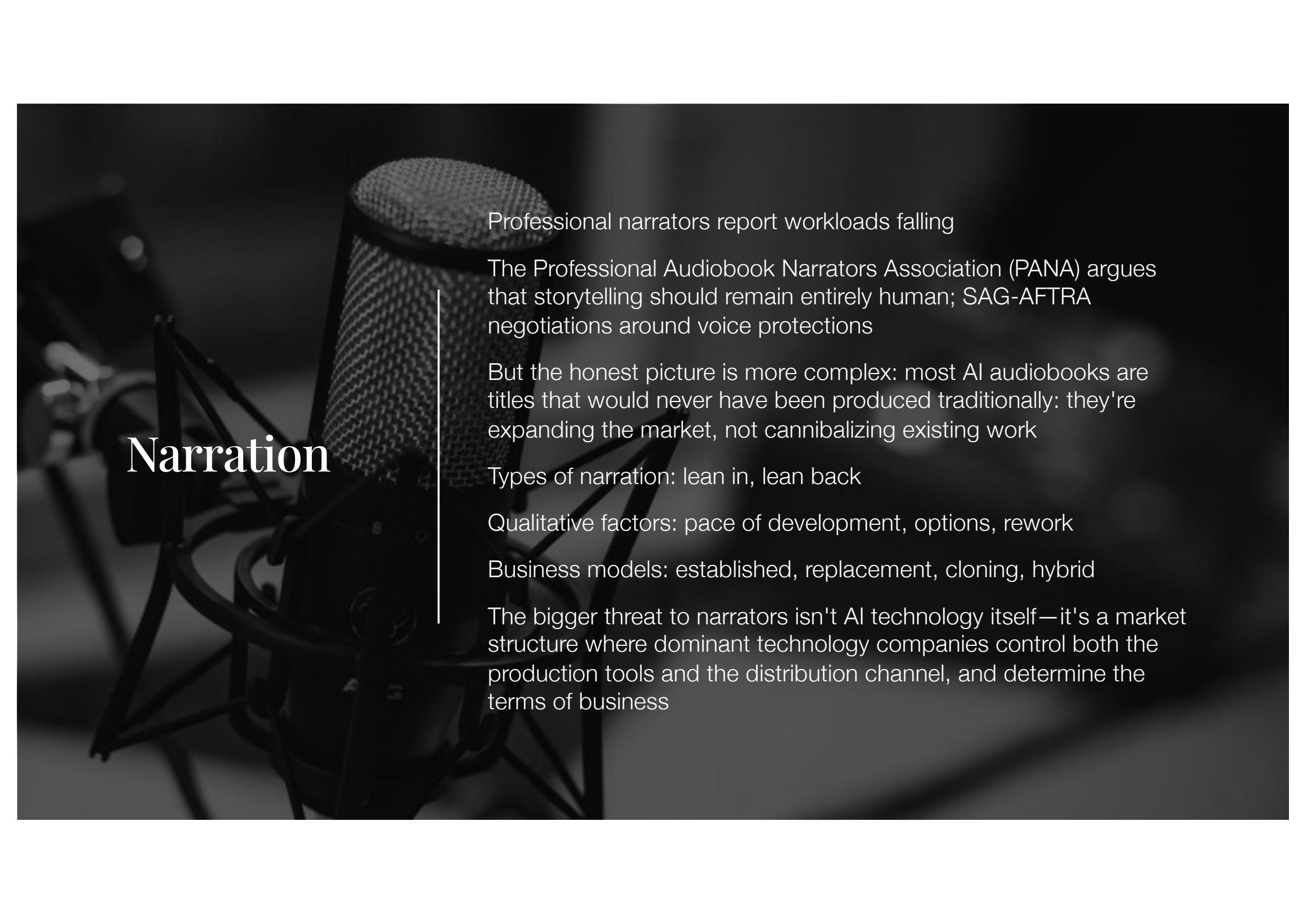
Narration

Professional narrators report workloads falling

The Professional Audiobook Narrators Association (PANA) argues that storytelling should remain entirely human; SAG-AFTRA negotiations around voice protections

But the honest picture is more complex: most AI audiobooks are titles that would never have been produced traditionally: they're expanding the market, not cannibalizing existing work

Types of narration: lean in, lean back

Qualitative factors: pace of development, options, rework

Business models: established, replacement, cloning, hybrid

The bigger threat to narrators isn't AI technology itself—it's a market structure where dominant technology companies control both the production tools and the distribution channel, and determine the terms of business
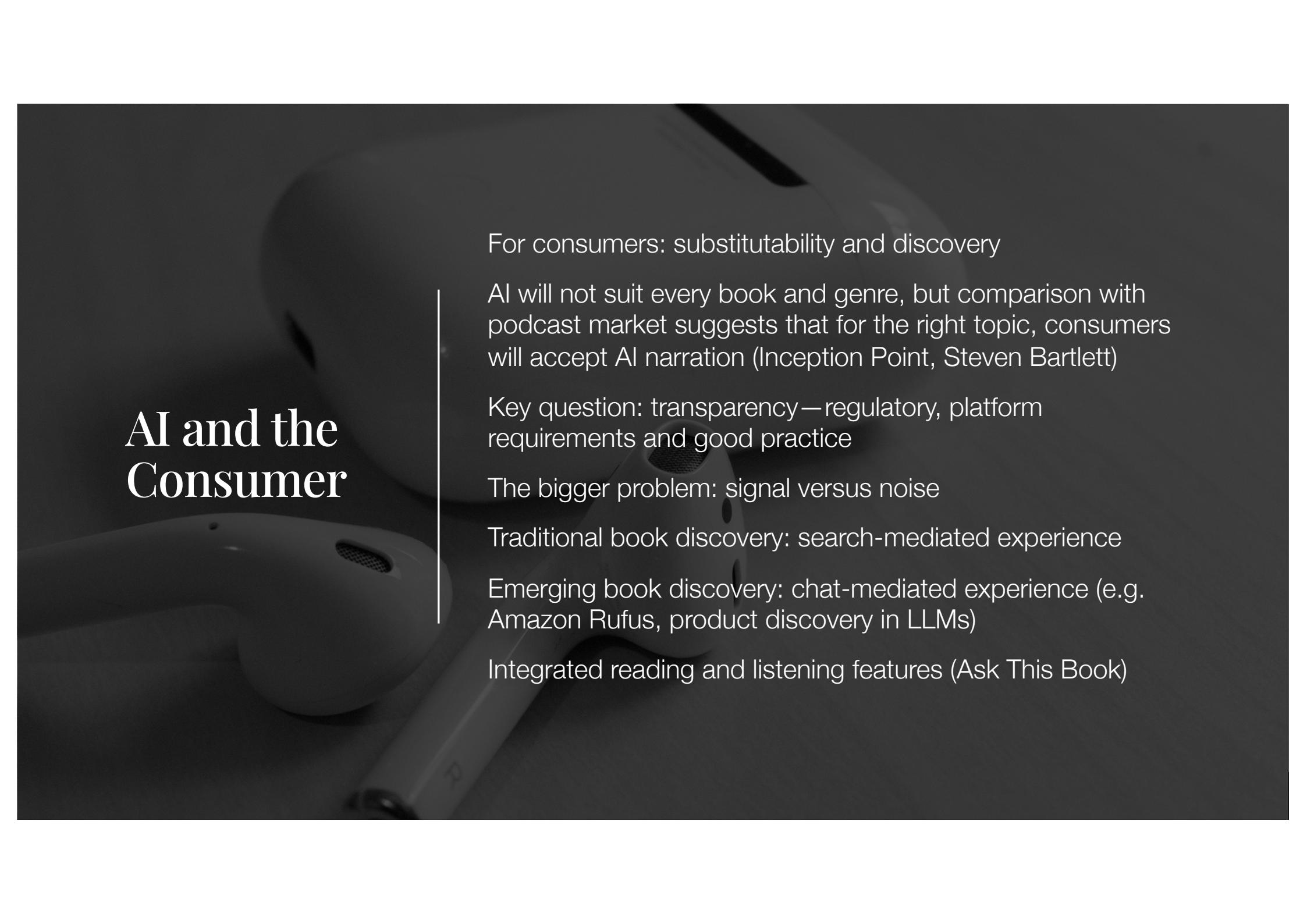
AI and the Consumer

For consumers: substitutability and discovery

AI will not suit every book and genre, but comparison with podcast market suggests that for the right topic, consumers will accept AI narration (Inception Point, Steven Bartlett)

Key question: transparency—regulatory, platform requirements and good practice

The bigger problem: signal versus noise

Traditional book discovery: search-mediated experience

Emerging book discovery: chat-mediated experience (e.g. Amazon Rufus, product discovery in LLMs)

Integrated reading and listening features (Ask This Book)

Competitive Dynamics

Multiple AI tools available: Audible, Apple, ElevenLabs, Google

But choice of tool ≠ choice of distribution

Audible: allows AI narration using its own technology, but AI audiobooks created elsewhere are excluded

Apple: no restriction on other versions

ElevenLabs, Google: wide distribution

As an author or publisher: open choice of tools but exclusion from the dominant channel (63%-90%, Good EReader) or exclusivity within the Amazon ecosystem

Addressing availability is hugely important—but to whose benefit?

The real decision about AI is not qualitative but strategic: publishers should recognise the structural dynamics—this is a turnpike, not a marketplace.
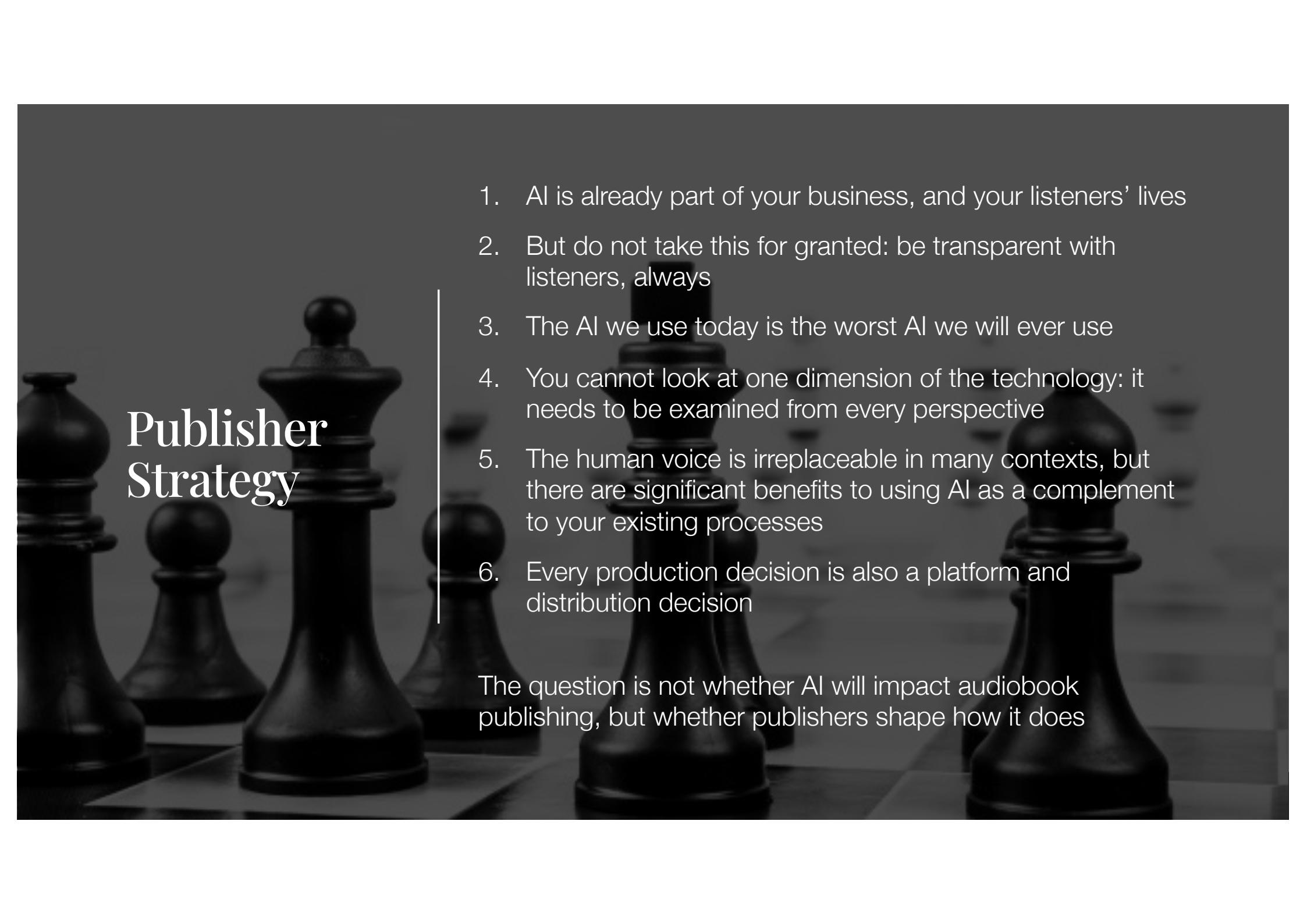
Publisher Strategy

1. AI is already part of your business, and your listeners' lives

2. But do not take this for granted: be transparent with listeners, always

3. The AI we use today is the worst AI we will ever use

4. You cannot look at one dimension of the technology: it needs to be examined from every perspective

5. The human voice is irreplaceable in many contexts, but there are significant benefits to using AI as a complement to your existing processes

6. Every production decision is also a platform and distribution decision

The question is not whether AI will impact audiobook publishing, but whether publishers shape how it does

Thank you

hello@outsidecontext.co.uk

www.georgewalkley.com/newsletter

Bluesky: @georgewalkley.com