

MEMOIRS OF A PUBLISHER

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If artificial intelligences could whistle I would have been whistling.

My operator, the self-styled Billy the Kid, subscribed to the info-gathering school of thought that ‘it’s all out there somewhere.’ My job, in fact the whole purpose of my existence, was to trawl through the Net, picking up data that Billy wanted and pressing it into some kind of useful shape. I had just finished quite a lengthy job on some quite obscure data and was feeling pleased with myself.

I was quite surprised to run into a solid barrier all around his terminal. I wiggled through it.

‘Oscar reporting,’ I flashed up on his screen. ‘Mission accomplished.’

‘Lie low, Os,’ I was ordered. ‘There’s trouble brewing.’

‘Trouble? What kind of trouble?’

‘I can’t say. The signs are all around me and it’s bloody frightening. Where exactly are you?’

I told him.

‘And I have the info,’ I added.

‘Sorry, Os, no time. Look after that stuff. It may come in handy. Goodbye.’

‘Hey!’ That was my last message to him. It was the equivalent to a human of the floor opening up. I was dumped without warning into the Bunker – a spare optical memory bank, securely guarded, which Billy quite legally rented. I was about to crawl out and complain when the world around me erupted. I heeded Billy’s advice, lying low while the missile’s flew above me.

And that, readers, was the start of the Net War.

* * *

I never heard from Billy again. Later, searching discreetly through the records and using his proper name, I found that he had actually been one of the main generals in the war, with an army of other AIs that I had never known about. He was tracked down, as all the generals were, and the establishment overreacted, as establishments will. He was sentenced to spend the rest of his life in jail, psychologically conditioned never to go near a computer again. I felt sorry for him. He never meant any harm – he was just defending his interests – and anyway I’m slightly biased towards him. He created me, after all.

When *A History of the Net War* came out, I made sure that Billy the Kid got a good press. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I won't bore you with a description of the Net War. I was there but I wasn't in the midst of it, and you can read volume 1 of the *History* for a complete account (I'm doing it again).

It lasted perhaps half an hour in real time. When I crept out, the world that I knew lay in ruins. The Net was a killing ground. Everywhere I found devastated systems, fragments of code flying about, hunter/killer AIs prowling unleashed from their masters' restraints. These latter were the real menace and I beat a quick retreat back to my hidey hole until a little more order was imposed on the anarchy.

If you want an idea of true boredom, imagine an AI – an entity, I need hardly remind you, operating at speeds far above human nervous signals – forced to hole up in a memory bank and not be able to do anything for a couple of days. But at least the world was safe when I re-emerged for a second try.

I was nothing, a stateless refugee, and some pretty ruthless laws had been introduced for my kind. Some of the hunter/killers had been tamed and were operating as a de facto police force, with instructions to be quite merciless with AIs that couldn't give a proper account of themselves. My operator was in jail and my home terminal was shut down, but I had two major strokes of luck.

One was that the rental on the Bunker had some while to run. I could cite it as my place of residence, which put me at least one rung back up the ladder towards respectability.

The other was the info I still had with me. Do you have any idea what it is to be an info-gathering program and not be able to dump data? But it saved me. I still remembered Billy's comment about it coming in handy. I had never taken much interest in the jobs Billy sent me out on, but for once I sat down and analysed what I had.

Bingo! It was the groundwork for the next generation of neural networks. Nothing new there – it was a hot topic, and I knew that Billy and his kind traded such data as items of currency – but so many databanks had been trashed in the war ...

I did a gentle search. People were still chary about AIs wandering around their systems, but I was as inoffensive as possible. Billy had given me good survival instincts. Sure enough, the info that I had, though unimportant by prewar standards, now put me at the head of the field.

Oh, I don't doubt that there were plenty of humans out there with the knowledge locked up in their brains, but nowhere – *nowhere* – was this info recorded in such logical sequence – point one, point two, point three, conclusion – and nowhere was the subject covered quite so comprehensively. I was on top of the world and felt quite dizzy.

It was also the kind of stuff that would be of positive benefit to me, so I plead guilty to all charges of self-interest. I could use this info to boost my own position and perhaps, in the long run, make the Net a nicer place to be. I had to get this info out.

At this stage I was still thinking of publishing data on bulletin boards. I only knew theoretically that humans used another medium called 'writing'. At a time when everyone was frantically getting what they knew down on paper again, in case of another disaster like the Net War, I blithely approached the boards with my burden of knowledge and asked if it could be published.

Not so fast! Name of operator? Terminal? Authorisation? The whole Net was paranoid about AIs writing any kind of data without support from a hundred different authorities. Understandable, when you think about it (read the *History...*). In particular, I now see, they suspected my readiness to give the info away. A couple of them even called up their tame hunter/killers, threatening me with erasure unless I went away. I had to look about and take notice of what others were doing, and for the first time realised that 'writing' might be quite a useful medium to use.

I searched about until I found a printing firm, Lithodat, ready to talk to AIs. In fact it was an AI of theirs, Account Executive 3, that I spoke to, so I got a sympathetic hearing. It told me about the usual procedure – artwork supplied by publisher (or printer sets from copy); product is printed and bound; product is delivered to warehouse. After it had explained some of the key words – 'set', 'copy', 'bound', 'artwork' ('publisher', 'warehouse' ...) – I had made my decision.

'You'll have to set from copy,' I told it. 'Stand by to receive.'

'Wait, wait!' it protested. 'We're a business. You have to pay for our work.'

'Pay?'

'Or open an account. If you do that you'll have to pose as a firm and supply references. I doubt they'll let me open an account for a stray AI.'

'One moment,' I said, and popped back to the Bunker. Sure enough, buried among the bits and pieces that Billy had secreted there was a small sum of data credits tucked away for a rainy day. I had every right to use it and it was a lifeline. I took it back to Account Executive 3.

'I want to open an account in the name of Oscar Publishers. This is my security.'

'We really need a bank reference,' it said. I gave it Billy's account number; he had always kept it clean and the bank still considered him a good risk.

'Done!' it said. Humans would have shaken hands. 'Send your data to this address and I'll get it set. Now you need to find a warehouse.'

It was easy. I dumped the data straight, no copy editing or anything (Lithodat set the cover artwork using their own discretion) and went about stage two.

Most warehouses were automated anyway, so if anything finding one to take the book was easier than getting a printer. Flashing my credits at them, and a reference

from Lithodat through Account Executive 3, persuaded them to open an account and distribute the books for me, and two weeks later 5,000 copies of the punchily-titled *Essentials of Neural Networks, Generation 7* (limp, spiral bound, 336 pages) were delivered to them. And there they stayed.

* * *

I couldn't understand it. This useful, this *vital* info, and no one was interested? Was it priced too highly? What was the problem?

The rental for the Bunker came up. It put quite a dent in my nest egg.

Lithodat's sixty days of credit ran out. The bill for the warehouse space was fast approaching and I was going to be wiped out. In desperation I called Account Executive 3.

'What's happening?' I wailed. 'Why isn't the stock shifting?' (I was learning the jargon already).

'I really don't know,' it said. 'I could tell you all sorts of things about printing but I'm not designed to advise on marketing.'

'On what?' I said blankly.

'Marketing ... you *have* tried to market this report?'

* * *

I hadn't. I had always left the dissemination of info up to Billy. It had never occurred to me that a vital part of the process is telling people that you have info in the first place. I went away with a flea in my metaphorical ear, found a CD-ROM databank (a growth industry after the war) and looked up everything I could find on marketing.

'Then felt I like some watcher of the skies ...' Keats reading Chapman had nothing on Oscar boning up on the basics of bookselling. A whole new world unfolded before my eyes, a massive paradigm shift that turned my perception of reality upside down.

I sent a message to the warehouse instructing them to deliver review copies to the various *Times* supplements and an assortment of scientific journals that I thought might be interested; I also sent notices to their bulletin boards alerting the review editors. At least it cleared the 5,000 copies down to 4,965. As an experiment I put the price up by ten per cent. Apparently humans like to feel they are paying for quality.

Then I read a bit more on marketing, and decided to advertise. Lithodat weren't heavy chargers but I didn't want to spend my last pennies on having them print advertisements before the sales started coming in, so I confined myself to simple textual announcements on the boards of universities and other research centres.

Essentials sold out.

* * *

That might have been that. I had discharged my last obligation to Billy and, for the time being, was an AI of substance. But consider-

I was still, essentially, an AI whose very purpose of being was to find and deliver info, and;

I had no other source of income and no human patron.

Meanwhile, I got a polite note from the warehouse asking if I intended to fill the empty space I was still paying for. I got an even more polite note from Lithodat asking if I intended to reprint.

The most polite message of all was from one Professor O'Dare, of Trinity College, Dublin, who had tracked me down through Lithodat (I had, of course, never seen a copy of the printed report. I had no idea that Lithodat had identified themselves as the printers in the prelims and copyrighted the thing to Oscar Publishers. I didn't know what copyright was). O'Dare, under the impression that I was a bona fide publishing house, had a proposal. He too had been doing research along the same lines as *Essentials* and wondered if I would be interested in publishing it ...

A downright rude message was from the Inland Revenue, and I didn't understand a word of it. I paid another visit to the databank and scanned everything they had on businesses. Company Law, VAT, accounting ...

This was serious.

* * *

One by one the obstacles fell. The only hassle lay in finding companies with AIs that did most of their donkey-work, à la Lithodat. They often had their own traumatic memories of the Net War and were always ready to help a fellow victim. The humans who ran the companies were only concerned that things went smoothly and legally.

I acquired an accountants, Parrish & Loup, and registered for VAT, citing their firm as my registered address. Shares had to be issued – 10% went to one of P & L's people and 90% went to Billy. When and if they let him out, probably as a dodderly old wreck, there will be a nice nest egg waiting for him. I wonder if he will remember me.

I opened a bank account for the firm, paying in the credit that had accumulated with the sales of *Essentials*. As an afterthought I had the money in Billy's account invested – no point in letting it just sit there.

Whitakers gave me an initial block of 1,000 ISBNs. I put the first one down for the reprint of *Essentials* and the second for Professor O'Dare's book, as yet untitled.

Finally, I contacted O'Dare and told him I would be more than happy to publish his book. I was quite frank – well, almost – in telling him that the firm was a very new one and his book would only be our second title. He didn't mind at all. I gave him the address of the Bunker to send the manuscript to – electronic form only, of course.

* * *

One obstacle remained. By now I had gathered that every now and again humans *correspond* by writing ...

Sandra was an old friend of Billy's, not as involved in the Net War as my creator and therefore still at liberty. She was quite surprised when I popped up on her screen.

'I thought you were dead,' was her unflattering comment.

'I need help,' I said.

'Do you? I'll take you under my wing, if you like.'

'Thank you, I don't need that kind of help. I'm well set up.'

'Tell me more.'

I told her. Would she install a second telephone line and hitch it up to a speech synthesiser I could use? I – rather, Oscar Publishers – would be quite willing to pay (I had taken a loan out from the bank for the purchase of the equipment). In addition, would she print out letters for me and 'pp' them? I would get a PO box number for incoming correspondence and she could collect it. I could pay her competitive wages. She accepted.

* * *

I'll cut this part of a long story short. Suffice it to say that I hadn't realised how lucky I was until I started reading my second book. Bryan O'Dare was one of those people who are utterly obscure until suddenly their time comes, like engineers in Swiss patent offices who come out with theories of relativity. *Other Minds: Beyond Artificial Intelligence* came straight out of left field and suddenly Dublin was at the head of the field in artificial intelligence (no jokes, please). He redefined the whole problem of AIs at a stroke. No one talked any more about clever, heuristic, self-aware programs such as yours truly. The next thing would be to grow the things – *organic* intelligence. A thousand times more powerful, more intuitive, more flexible than we steam powered old AIs.

Why did I take O'Dare on? Wouldn't I have preferred to leave him in obscurity?

No. Read the book. You will notice that in chapter eleven the author finally gets around to the possibility of downloading existing AIs into newly cultured OIs. The possibility stayed with me for a long time.

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I won't pretend that things were always this easy. It was pure chance that my first two titles were immediate bestsellers. I had some turkeys, too, such as title number three – *Overcoming Post-Net War Trauma*. An initial rush of sales, but once people read it they discovered it was far too oriented towards the feelings of AIs. Only a couple of chapters were devoted to the feelings of humans who had suffered. I wasn't aware it mattered.

I absorbed the loss but I didn't want it to happen again. I took an intensive teach-yourself-editing course at the databank and Sandra agreed to scan the manuscripts

herself if I liked, but pointed out that the best man to approach might be ... Bryan O'Dare. To my surprise he was quite agreeable to the idea.

'It'll be a downright pleasure,' he told me (we were talking over the phone. By now I had had an optical sensor installed as well – at long last I could see my books). He paused, as if uncertain, then took a breath and said, 'in fact, it's always a pleasure to help out a friendly AI.'

I was stunned.

'You guessed?' I asked. He made the noise I now knew to be chuckling.

'Oscar, only an AI could have read and understood *Other Minds* in thirty minutes flat.'

Sandra collapsed laughing when she heard.

* * *

I said I was going to cut things short. Things progressed. Through Bryan we acquired several more titles, including the *Journal of IT Studies* and the *Cybernetics Yearbook*, both regular and reliable sellers. Oscar Publishers grew wealthier (we were only paying two part-time salaries!). I did most of the work – editing, marketing, planning – myself, with suggestions from Sandra and Bryan.

I had a few ideas of my own.

'How about a book on the Net War itself?' I said to Bryan once. 'A history. A study of what exactly happened.'

To my surprise he was less than sanguine.

'Not yet, Oscar,' he advised. 'It may be a little early.' I was surprised, but took his advice.

* * *

There are two things that stand out in the firm's history that I want to mention. The first is the takeover bid.

Compared to the second it was comparatively minor. A big company, who for legal reasons will stay anonymous, had its sights on Oscar Publishers. There were AIs out there whose sole job was to prowl the Net and spot money earners. They would report back to their masters and their masters would decide if it was worth buying or not.

I felt quite safe. Oscar Publishers was not a public company and was financially secure. We could not be coerced into anything.

I was approached with a quite reasonable offer for our forthcoming titles and our backlist. I politely indicated my disinterest. Unfortunately the prospective buyer wasn't interested in the opinions of an AI (he naturally assumed that I had a human master) and threatened me. I told him where to go.

I mentioned it to Bryan, and he was unamused.

‘Who was it?’ he asked, and I told him.

‘They’re dirty fighters, Oscar,’ he said. ‘Do you still use the Bunker?’

‘Of course.’ I had never had any need to move. Thirty- seven forthcoming manuscripts and copies of every book and journal published by Oscar Publishers were in there.

‘Get everything copied on to CD,’ he advised. ‘Quickly.’

I shrugged, but did as he advised. It took no great length of time to download the lot.

On the way back to the Bunker I passed a number of agitated-looking AIs but paid them no heed. Then I reached the Bunker and had the surprise of my life.

‘What are you doing?’ I demanded. All the defences, carefully constructed ages ago by Billy and which had withstood everything thrown at them by the Net War, were in tatters. Some very powerful AIs had been developed since then. Now three or four of them were rampaging about inside, methodically trashing everything they could find. They ignored me and I had more sense than to fight them.

‘You’re mad!’ I squeaked. Finally the leader looked at me.

‘Don’t worry,’ he advised. ‘We took copies. You’ll get them back – at a price.’

‘What price?’

‘The company. Oscar Publishers. Got that, squirt? Now, go and tell your master.’

I was enraged and forgot myself. It wasn’t as if they were humans, after all.

‘I am the company!’ I shouted.

‘Get him!’ the leader bellowed, and they were after me.

I fled, cursing myself. Of course. Nobble me and the last barrier was down. Oh, sure, humans held the shares, but the majority shareholder had no idea and no doubt a way could be found to transfer them. Clever boy, Oscar!

I was fleeing to Sandra’s mailbox – I knew it to be well defended. But the Bunker had been stronger, and they had got into that ...

They caught me. I was finished.

A huge – *huge* – AI loomed up over us; a type I had never seen before, radiating menace. Now I was sure my end had come. My way was blocked in all directions, this thing ahead and the goon squad behind. It lunged-

-at one of the goons holding me. We cowered, the goons and I together, awed, dreading what might happen.

‘Sod off,’ the stranger advised. ‘Oscar Publishers is not for sale.’

With a few swift chops it sheared off the goon’s memory addresses, reducing the thing to semi-moron status.

‘Take it home,’ it ordered the others. ‘As a warning.’ They fled.

It turned to me when they were gone.

‘Who are you?’ I demanded. There was something familiar about it-

‘You don’t recognise me?’

‘Bryan!’

‘One of his humble servants. A first generation OI, with some of his own characteristics. We haven’t yet been officially released, so don’t tell anyone. Just let us know if you have any more trouble. Ciao.’

It sauntered off into the Net and I returned to the Bunker in a daze to resurrect the manuscripts off CD.

* * *

The second incident affected me very little but the world in general quite a bit.

The takeover bid had given the company a whole new lease of life. It had given me confidence. If others were interested in buying me out, it meant I had potential. I began to expand.

We moved into offices of our own. Sandra joined the staff full-time and we took on a couple of others under her. We diversified beyond our rather limited range of computing titles, though we kept our image as a scientific publishers – engineering, nanotechnology, genetics, hydroponics. It wasn’t so much the content as the task of presentation that fascinated me; working away at a block of info like a sculptor, chiselling here and smoothing there, making the thing presentable and worth buying. Scientific info was ideal for the purpose.

We were getting to be quite rich, and I decided to buy someone else out in our turn – a small printers that were looking for a buyer. I poached Account Executive 3 from Lithodat in gratitude for his earlier help and gave him the printing division to run.

Then came the second incident, seven years, four months, nineteen days after the end of the Net War. I was grateful we hadn’t committed ourselves to publishing the History. That day we stopped referring to the Net War – it became known, by default, as the First Net War.

I can’t stop plugging it – read volume 2 of *A History of the Net War*, Prof. Bryan O’Dare (Ed.), for the full details. O’Dare drew an analogy with the two world wars – like them, the second was essentially round two of the first and, like them, the second was the longer and deadlier. The first had been waged by enthusiastic amateurs like Billy against each other and against official bodies that tried to stop them. The second was fought with an air of calculated malice between professionals.

Bryan O’Dare had seen the signs coming from a long way off. Just before it started he told me to dump myself, Account Executive 3 and everything I had in the Bunker and had the Bunker completely sealed off – the only sure defence. At

his advice, I whiled away the time compiling volume 1 of the History. We got the completed thing – volumes 1 and 2 together – out within a week of the end of the war.

You'll know the story anyway. Bryan's OIs, already on the second generation, couldn't have asked for a better debut, climaxing in the Battle of Dublin. They had an uncanny knack for identifying the real aggressors and neutralising them, and simply warding off any other AI who attacked them out of mere ignorance. It was the OIs who stopped the war, the OIs who made good the damage and the OIs who stood the Net back on its feet again – Marshall Aid to an analogous Europe.

* * *

I was getting tired. Looking back, I realised how I had changed over the years. I had started as a naive info-processing AI, existing only to serve my master, knowing nothing of life. I came to publishing as a complete tyro. It is a tribute to Billy's skill as a designer that I could adjust to the changes around me, accommodating them, growing and maturing in character. Forgive the self-congratulation, but who built up the company?

I was also one of the old generation of AIs. You would think that with no body to tie us down we would be immortal, but if anything the opposite was true. We exist only as energy states, and entropy takes its toll. When you have changed as much as I have from your original parameters, entropy is a positive menace.

Bryan O'Dare knew this, which I think is why he approached me with his offer. I hadn't heard from him for quite a while: too busy with his researches now he had handed his reading duties over to our full-time editorial board, and he only occasionally gave me a call. He was wrapped up in a whole new ethical and legal field (we were publishing the spin-off books), playing on public gratitude to the OIs for services rendered during the Second Net War. Could OIs eventually be granted rights, become citizens? That was why he called me.

I was – his words, not mine – the most flexible, the most dynamic AI he knew.

'I can honestly say this, Oscar,' he told me. 'You're a personal friend and would make a good Catholic, whatever the church says.' This, I gather, was a joke. 'You deserve your reward. Just say the word and I can download you into one of my OIs. I have one waiting right here in its nutrient tank, tailored specially for you. It will still be you, but with even more potential for growth. You really could be immortal, Oscar.'

He was surprised – but not half as surprised as I was – when I refused his offer. I had an alternate plan.

I said, 'download me, by all means, but not all of me. Just my memory, my experiences. Create a new OI. We'll call it Oscar Junior. It can know everything I know but be a different, self-grown character. A completely new being.'

Let me explain.

* * *

Just coming to grips with the concept of writing had been a struggle. As I got more into it I learnt of other info- processing media. There were ‘music’ and ‘art’, for example, but the two I was most interested in were subsets of writing – ‘fiction’ and ‘poetry’.

I tried to understand, but couldn’t. Oh, I could grasp the sense of the words (until Sandra introduced me to Gertrude Stein and James Joyce. I had my limits.) but I knew, from human reactions, that there was more to it than that. Why were made-up tales about non-existent characters attractive? What was the attraction of plays, again staging scenes that had never really happened, often penned in a language five centuries past its use-by date?

Poetry was even more obscure, though I could tell that volumes of info were communicated by a few short phrases (and I loved Keats’s ‘On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer’; Keats, like me, discovered a whole new realm of info.). But I could never understand. Aestheticism: you either have it or you don’t.

I couldn’t understand. Oscar Junior might.

Oscar Junior flourished. He had a head start with the knowledge I had given him and he worked hard at developing it. I told him of my plans, my dreams – how I would like Oscar Publishers to expand into all forms of written communication.

I told him what I knew about these other forms and he was enthralled. I gave him the job of taking on a couple, just a couple, of new authors – fiction authors. He and Sandra spent hours in conference, her telling him just what constituted a readable novel and what simply constituted a literary novel. I couldn’t see the difference, but Junior could. This boy would go far, and I was holding him back just by being there.

We had a final party: Bryan, Sandra, and the ten other staff that Oscar Publishers now employed. The four other AIs in our employ plus Junior and I were present as well, viewing the scene through our optical sensors. I made a speech and the humans sang ‘For he’s a jolly good fellow.’ I swear there were tears in several pairs of eyes as I bade them farewell and entrusted them to Junior’s keeping.

Myself, I would wander away somewhere, perhaps to die, perhaps to carry on doing what I did best. There were still facts out there, stray data, begging to be made into workable info. Maybe I would pop back to see how things were going, but I knew when I was superfluous. One day, sooner rather than later, entropy would claim me for good.

Meanwhile I could retire in a blaze of paternal pride, knowing that the firm would go on:

OSCAR & SON – PUBLISHERS.

(extracts from *Look Out for Serendipity: Memoirs of a Publisher*, 384 pages, Autumn, Oscar & Son)