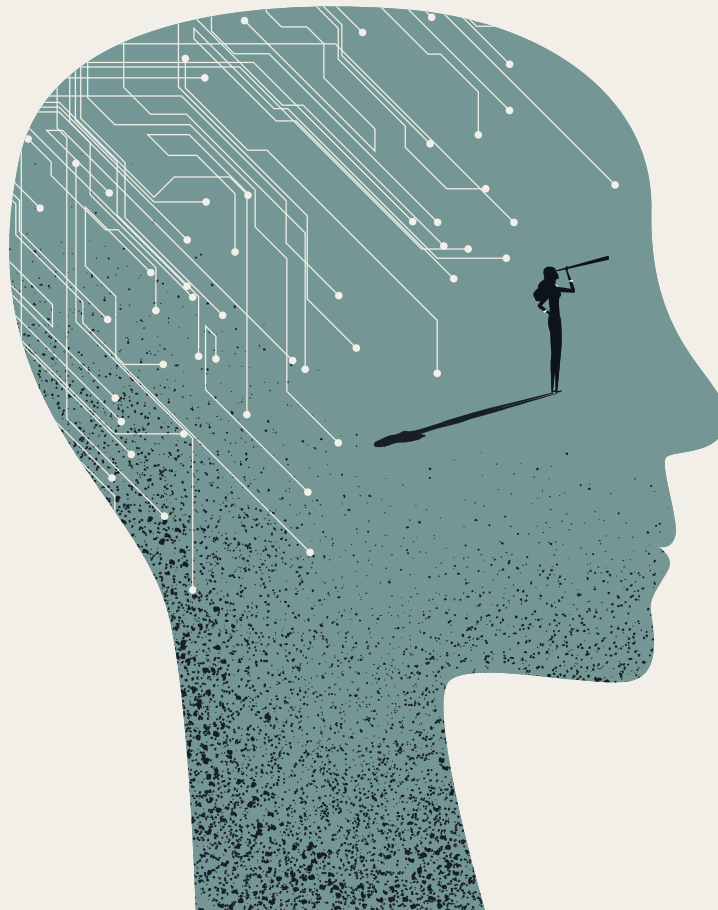


# Desperately seeking the truth about what AI means for freelancers



AI is a topic of extremes – promising us the world one minute, threatening to destroy our livelihoods the next. But the reality is a lot more nuanced, complicated and a whole lot less dramatic. It's time to step away from the hype.

**By Penny Brazier**

You've got evangelists preaching that AI is going to solve everything for everyone. You've got the "hell no" brigade who won't touch it with somebody else's barge pole. And you've got a whole bunch of hot-take headless chickens running around spreading uninformed fear.

Then you've got folks like me, just sitting here quietly hoping a grown-up will step up and, you know, sort it all out. So that when we check again in 18 months' time, AI will be solved and we can get on with living in peaceful harmony with our robot brethren.

Also known as denial.

But the really-real reality about AI is the vast, murky expanse in between the heaven and the hell – the space where people are actually working and engaging with the technology, rather than just speculating. Those narratives are quiet, complicated, often mundane, and a hell of a lot less clickable. But, if we're being sensible business owners, that's the bit we need to look square in the face.

I decided it was time to step off the LinkedIn carousel of horror and go and find some of those real stories.

### **Terminator, WALL-E or neither?**

Dr Jennifer Chubb is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of York. Her work focuses on responsibility in science and the ethics of emerging technology. She says we should not underestimate the power of the stories we tell ourselves about AI.

"Historically, new technology has always been presented in this way. But one person's dystopia can be another person's utopia. On the one hand, we may fear losing part of ourselves or even our lives as part of the changes. But new technology



## **"New technology can pose solutions for workers and society."**

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"People love stories, but we're naturally drawn to polarised opinions. We need to be careful because there's often an agenda – a newspaper looking for attention and sales, or a business trying to sell products. And the danger of hype is that it's self-fulfilling. We need to follow what's going on, without getting caught up in it."

We have a stark choice here. We can continue to hide behind our sofas. Or we can venture inside the matrix and find out what's really happening.

Maybe it's not as bad as we think?

### **If you can't beat 'em...**

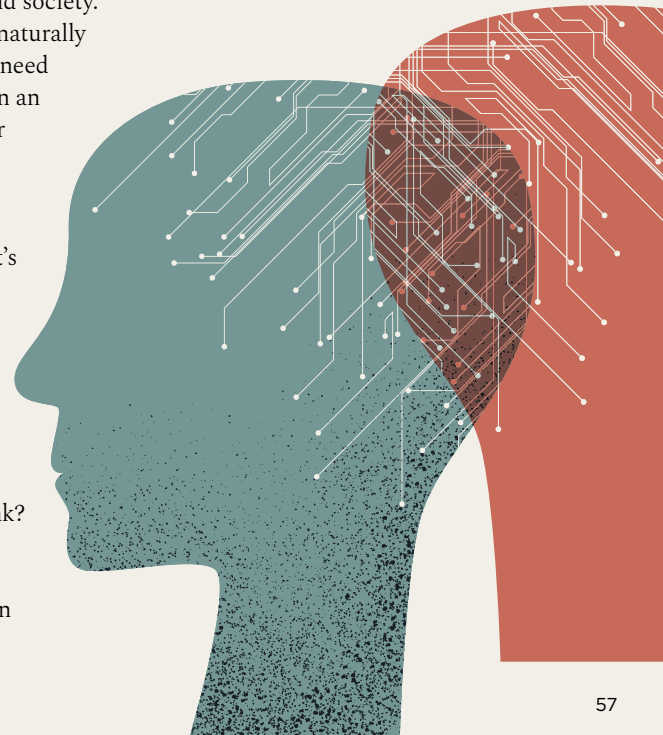
Freelance writer and editor Lauren McMenemy was attempting to

re-enter the freelance marketplace following a sabbatical due to burnout when ChatGPT exploded in the content world. When she spotted a part-time role as an 'annotator', training models for an AI company, she saw it as a chance to tackle the issue head on.

"I figured I could learn more from the inside than just reading up", Lauren says. "This firm had good ethics, and that was a big reason for me joining them.

"Their focus is retrieval augmented generation – designed to augment the journey of research, rather than replace humans. We're trying to teach the model how the human brain works when it's digging into a complex situation – and how to generate an answer that is fully cited, so the user can follow the breadcrumbs for more information."

She loved it so much she's had her 6-month contract extended to 18 months. >



“I got really interested in it. There are absolutely companies who are out there to replace creatives, no bones about it. But there are also those who are there to supplement the world of creativity.”

### Am I livestock?

James Best is a freelance creative director for brands and agencies, based in New York. Earlier this year, he was approached by a large platform that sources writers and experts for the purpose of training Large Language Models (LLMs).

Unfortunately, his experience could not have been more different from Lauren’s.

“It started off okay. I worked for about four weeks. And then there was five days of nothing. I was trying to find out what was going on, but there was no point of contact, other than being in a Slack channel. I couldn’t get a response from anyone.”

Freelancers are assigned a payment tier based on an online test – James was assigned the top level, platinum. But it turned out that his rate of pay was not guaranteed if sufficient work was not completed. “The interface was saying ‘if you don’t do 15 hours a week, you’ll lose your platinum status’. Everybody is freaking out because if there’s no work, how can you do your 15 hours? But there’s nobody to complain to.

“When it does move, it moves super quickly. You have to keep checking the website to see if there are any notifications. And if you get one

at, say, 9pm, you think ‘oh well if I work on this ‘til 2am I might make a little extra money’ – you’re aware the work might not be there in the morning. It feels exploitative. And it’s all so odd, you can never get hold of anyone. There’s a sense of – who are we doing this for? Why are we doing it? It’s like something out of *Severance*.”

James’ story seems to connect with recent pieces in the media about ‘AI sweatshops’ where workers around the world are working round the clock for a pittance to train large generative AI models – sometimes being penalised or not paid at all if work is not done to a certain standard. It’s worrying that companies can get away with this and fly it under a ‘freelance’ banner.

**“There’s a sense of – who are we doing this for? Why are we doing it? It’s like something out of *Severance*.”**



### Paranoid androids

The weird, faceless ‘machines have taken over’ vibe is not a million miles away from the experience of Dana Yewbank, a freelance content writer and editor based in Illinois.

Dana had applied for a freelance content writing gig that specified ‘no AI-generated content’. As a confidently AI-free freelancer, she figured it should be a great fit. However, the trial assignment did not go to plan.

“I turned in this piece, and the next thing I hear back from them is that they had run it through their AI detection tools, and it had come up 76% likely to have been generated by AI. They told me they run all their writers’ work through AI detectors and this was the highest score they’d ever seen.

“I didn’t know what to do. First of all, I didn’t even know AI detection was a thing at this point. And second of all, I was like, you know, I didn’t use AI! What do I even do in this situation?”

Despite Dana’s assurances that the piece was 100% human-generated, the client overruled her.

“Basically they just weren’t hearing it. AI detection is one thing, but part of what I struggled with was that the client was so invested in the metrics that they weren’t even really willing to have a conversation with me about what had happened.”

After much painful to-ing and fro-ing, Dana did get paid for her work. But the company never got back in touch and the relationship ended. Dana has since done plenty of research into AI detection tools and found they are notoriously unreliable.

“Despite not accepting AI-generated content, these companies are still perfectly happy to use AI detection tools. They think

that's what's going to protect them from losing their search rankings. But there's so much confusion around how these tools really work and how accurate they are."

### The man in the mirror

Listening to Dana and James' stories, I start to wonder – is it really the technology that's at fault here? Or is it the greedy, grubby, clueless humans who have the keys to the AI car but don't really know how to drive it yet? And those who see it as a fast track to money and power, with little concern for the people they exploit along the way?

When we get to the Emerald City, in the Land of AI Oz, is the wizard hiding behind the curtain actually a good old-fashioned shitty client?

Because, grim as they are, as freelancers, we are so used to those guys. We all get burned occasionally, but generally we can spot the signs, and if we're experienced enough we know when to walk away.

More governance and regulation in the AI wild west is badly needed on so many levels – and it does seem to be coming, albeit slowly. But maybe we're better equipped to deal with these cowboys than we think, even now.



### Knowledge is power

Falling foul of terrible business practices is just one aspect to consider though. A market shift in terms of what customers are looking for from creative freelancers is on the horizon. Much as I was hoping people would be like “yeah that's not going to happen, everything will stay the same, tra la la”, everyone I spoke to for this article agreed that things are changing. Okay. Breathe. So how do we prepare for that?

Having worked for an AI company for the past year, Lauren is feeling more philosophical about the future.

“Of course there are people out there who are going to choose AI instead of hiring a copywriter”, she says. “But those are the same people who would have used a content farm before – the people who are always looking for the cheapest, quickest solution. The people who want to invest in their content, who want to truly create and build audiences who are interested in stories – those people are now realising the importance of having human interaction.”

Dr Chubb agrees. “I do think some of the more mundane tasks may become competitive. But people do value and

revere authentic human work. AI doesn't do nuance, serendipity or surprise. It's not good at context and relies on predicting what is statistically likely – is that really what readers want from copy? I doubt it. AI is not the silver bullet some people think it is. You could well see people turning round and saying, ‘Actually, human work is just better.’”

I have to say, the more I talk to people about AI, particularly those working with it, the better I feel. Even when the stories are concerning – the irresponsible business practices, plagiarism, bias, lack of regulation and the other multitude of challenges – this is not the apocalypse, these are problems to be solved.

And the more we have not-traditionally-techy people like you and I engaging with the technology, trying to understand it, play with it, and see what it can do – really, the better.

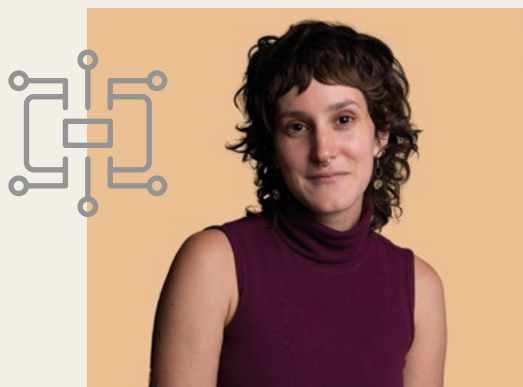
The answer is to stop hiding and start the conversation. ●

Find Lauren McMenemy on LinkedIn /LJMcMenemy or at [thecontenttype.com](https://www.thecontenttype.com)


Find James Best on LinkedIn /TheJamesBest or at [freejamesbest.com](https://www.freejamesbest.com)

Find Dana Yewbank on LinkedIn or at [danayewbank.com](https://www.danayewbank.com)

Find Dr Jennifer Chubb on LinkedIn /JennChubb or at [york.ac.uk/sociology/our-staff/academic/jenn-chubb](https://www.york.ac.uk/sociology/our-staff/academic/jenn-chubb)



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