

Interview with Rootcause

1. Your work, briefly

Rootcause works on building information power. We bring together AI, data and strategic communications skills, and we work with organisations across the progressive ecosystem to help them build their own information power.

We do this because we have seen unprecedented disruption to how people across the country consume information. We've moved from a small number of traditional newspapers, TV channels and radio stations to a hugely fragmented, social-media-driven environment where people are accessing different platforms and seeing different personalised feeds. We've been building technology solutions to help organisations find, reach and engage their audiences

A lot of what we're seeing in the UK right now is the downstream impact of that. Many progressive organisations are on the back foot: they're set up for the old media-driven world and need to transition to a much more social-first operation that reflects how people actually consume information today. We think we've built services that can help them do that.

We've built the Drumbeat Machine to tackle this – it's AI-powered strategic intelligence, analysis and content suggestions all personalised to our clients' current campaigns and priority messages.

2. What hostile actors do well

The right understood this shift earlier than anyone else. They've been making strategic choices and investments for the last decade that correctly read the direction of travel in the information environment, while many progressive organisations carried on working in more traditional ways.

That's now paying off twofold. Partly because they've built a lot of power on social media platforms. But also because the period in which they were doing that was precisely the period in which the new AI technologies — large language models — were being trained. So those models are increasingly likely to reflect back to people a world in which progressive organisations are on the back foot in the information environment.

So to my mind, what the far right, hostile parties and governments have done better is simple: they spotted the direction of travel early, they started making choices that work with the grain of modern information environments, and those choices are now paying off both in the audiences they've built and in how those audiences are influencing the new technologies people use to understand the world around them.

3. The opportunity for unions

Technology can help unions monitor and analyse the information environment, and communicate more effectively within it.

We spend a lot of time thinking about what we call the data to insights to discourse pipeline. That means monitoring the information environment to see what people are talking about and where they're talking about it; then looking at what they're actually saying, so you understand how to engage with them effectively; and then producing content that engages people and builds support for unions and the causes associated with them.

4. Where it's easy, where it's hard

We get results quickly when people genuinely put time into working in partnership — giving us feedback, helping us iterate the product, helping us move fast so we can learn fast. Where something doesn't work, we stop quickly; where it does, we double down.

What gets in the way is partly scepticism about AI, and holding AI to a very high standard. But more often it's people feeling they're not quite ready to make the change, even though they know the change needs to be made. There's something here about bravery, and about a fear of what change actually looks like, that stops people getting going.

5. What unions misunderstand

I think unions misunderstand that AI can be a job creator. We're already looking at the editorial needs created by the briefings we produce — those will be roles that get created. And we think the Drumbeat Machine, the technology we've built, helps people get better at their jobs. It isn't about replacing them.

Unions get something very right: the amount of power being accumulated by major technology companies is problematic, and the relationship between technology and power has real implications for the workforce. But there's a second half to that. Where can the workforce leverage AI in ways

that let people have more impact in their jobs, and let organisations operate more efficiently and stay closer to the impact they're actually trying to have? Efficiency doesn't have to mean cuts. It can mean proximity to impact. That's an important way to think about it.

6. Being better partners

If unions are using technology — particularly technology in its early stages, like the Drumbeat Machine — then feedback, engagement and fine-tuning are what make it really work. The whole basis of our product is that it's personalisable and bespoke. So the more time unions put into feedback and into making sure the product works for them, the more they will get out of it.

7. Preparing for the future

Unions should be playing with artificial intelligence. Be really mindful that some of the risks around power and jobs are real — but so are the opportunities in enabling people to play, learn and experiment with a technology that is likely to transform how we create, consume, exchange and understand information about the world around us.

So there's something here about AI skills. But there's also something about creating a permissive environment where people can simply learn and play with AI. I think that would be really helpful.

8. What Unions 21 could do

Exactly this kind of thing: showing where people who share progressive values are experimenting with technology, what's working in those experiments, and what it will take to move them from things that look like they might work to things that are genuinely transforming people's working conditions and livelihoods.

9. Anything else

Unions need to hear that there's a sword-and-shield aspect to artificial intelligence. It's going to create pressures in the workforce that require unions to step up and protect jobs. But at the same time, there are opportunities that — if unions seize them — will let them do their job of protecting and improving working conditions far more effectively, because they won't be spending time on things that are further removed from impact.

As with anything, there will be challenges and there will be opportunities. It's important to scope the opportunities at the same time as understanding and overcoming the challenges.