

United States

## THE FUTURE OF MEDIA IS HERE, AND I WAS THERE

Content marketers convene in Boston to rid the world of bad content, get under your skin, and scavenge the rotting bones of journalism

By [Sean Cooper](#)  
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The assignment is to go up to Boston to cover the third annual Content Marketing Conference, a sold-out, \$1,250/ticket, four-day powwow for 300 marketing professionals flown in from San Fran and Toronto and other prosperous North American cities. They will sleep at the conference hotel in \$349/night rooms with swanky waterfront views. The Struggling Writer is picked up at the train station by a taxi and deposited at the corner of a dingy half-block. The taxi departs hastily. The S.W. finds the entrance to the Airbnb rental, a narrow building adorned in uninspired graffiti.

The Content Marketing Conference takes place in a wing of the Westin Hotel. The spectacular, light-filled lobby is abuzz with men and women ages 20s to 50s in biz attire tapping on laptops, while others quickly wheel compact travel luggage over polished marble. A long escalator to the second floor is decorated with decals of male and female Superheroes soaring through space: neon-green faces, neon-green capes. Spandex-enhanced anatomies accompany motivational implorings such as “Rid the World of Bad Content.”

The S.W. is here because the roaring fire that was 20th-century nonfiction magazine literature has been hosed down to wet coals. In this new 21st-century post-literature era, the techniques and tools of the journalism trade have been plundered by scavenger industries, which rightly foresaw profit opportunities in what has been called branded content, native advertising, or content marketing, which agglomerates techniques used to build characters, create narrative arcs, and establish tones of

voice that once served as conduits for nonfiction writers attempting to intimately mind-meld with readers. While journalism continues to struggle, burgled storytelling devices are being leveraged at scale by content-marketing agencies and branding studios that publish content stories to satisfy shareholder expectations. One industry analysis estimates that the content-marketing business will be worth \$215 billion in 2017. The Struggling Writer is here to see them count the money.



In the hallway of the exhibit hall, the S.W. eats the provided boxed lunch with Ketan: Indian, male, 30s. Ketan studied advertising in India as an undergrad and communications in grad school at Emerson and is now the primary content-marketing writer for the North American operations of a multibillion-dollar manufacturer of credit-card terminals. There are a few others on his team, but there are advantages to a single mind tasked w/overseeing all of the brand's content. It allows him to create a cohesive brand voice and point of view across his employer's websites, sell sheets, and text library.

Ketan is skinny, calm, and polite, with parted black hair that reaches past his ears. The S.W. remarks that he's been surprised by the quality of the content he's been reading. Ketan says a book he returns to often is a collection of passages from renowned authors like Orwell broken down into techniques to study. "It's important to keep learning," he says between sips from a can of Sprite. "Because you can always become a better writer."

With many attendees using Tuesday as a travel day, it's not until Wednesday morning that the conference kicks into in full swing. Including the speakers and comped tickets, attendance is near 400. Energy is high. The guests feast on a spread of sliced tropical fruits and egg sandwiches. Starbucks coffee is set up at buffet tables in the middle of the exhibit hall. Default male clothing is Banana Republic chinos, tucked-in button-down shirts, brown leather shoes. Females wear knee-length dresses and sweaters against the hotel's chilly air conditioning. The guests shake hands, smile, exchange business cards. They all look rested from a night of sleep in soundproof rooms behind blackout curtains. One woman remembers another from last year's conference in Las Vegas; they hug jocundly and agree this year is much better in Boston. It's 96 percent white +/- 3 percent.

A little before 8 a.m., the guests make their way into the main auditorium for the opening ceremony. The house lights are dimmed, the space undulates with moody purple and green lights emanating from the stage. The house photographer is a nervous white male, 20s, who darts around the room.

He wears khakis and a white oxford shirt. His flash splashes brightly onto a group posing together, their red lipsticks freshly imprinted on the white coffee cups in their hands.

On the stage, 3-foot-tall CMC letters glow the bright Superhero-neon green. Pop music blasts out of massive black speakers. Females shimmy their shoulders as they move into rows. Males head-nod “what’s up,” exchange fist bumps. Plastic cases on the chair seats contain hagiographic baseball cards for each Superhero speaker. Their faces are in Superhero green, Superhero names and Superpowers are on the back. The Digital Dynamo and Killer Content Girl both fight against a common enemy, Captain Crappy Content.

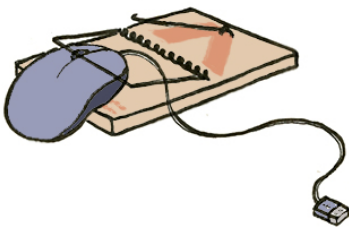
A white male, half-bald, 50s, comes on stage wearing a black CMC T-shirt underneath a lime-green sport coat. He wears dark jeans and black patent-leather sneakers that reflect the moody purple stage lights. His name is Byron White. He wants to tell a story.

Up early one morning after finishing yoga, Byron White was driving to his office when he came upon a white utility van’s elegant brand identity of three words: “Design. Build. Repeat.” Blown away, White visited the van’s website. It belonged to a local carpenter; the carpenter had his own story on the website; the carpenter’s destiny was sealed at the young age of 2 at his grandmother’s house when he played w/ tools hammering nails into a piece of scrap wood. White quotes the website content story: “ ‘Everyone knew I would be a carpenter...’ ” White, exuberant: “This is unbelievable. This is truly remarkable. This guy has nailed content marketing.”

Behind the S.W., a woman groans at the obviousness of the pun, but White does not seem to notice he’s made it. White emailed the carpenter re: wanting to use this platonic ideal of content marketing at his upcoming content-marketing conference. What did the carpenter say? White builds it up. White cribs Steve Jobs doing a product reveal. Finally, White flashes a screenshot of the carpenter’s reply onto the giant screens hung over the stage. Reflexively obedient, some in the crowd go, “Wow.”

Carpenter’s email: “Flattered really. Thanks so much. Where’s the keynote? How can I be of help?”

White goes into moral-of-the-story mode: “His words back to me reflected his brand. His *simplicity in the world*.” White draws it out like someone who has recently adopted *simplicity in the world* as a personal mantra. “And I think we need to do exactly that in content marketing, to strip it down. That’s my message today.”



Perhaps sensing that his gut punch did not land quite as anticipated, White anxiously speeds through matters of conference business, WiFi password “Superhero,” etc. White’s motion is sharklike, back and forth across the stage. The conference is an advertisement/brand extension of the company he owns here in Boston called WriterAccess. The concept began as a graphic-arts staffing firm, where sales reps took graphic-designer portfolios out to companies for hire, long before those portfolios could be shared online. He tells the crowd that to create the portfolios he bought a \$25,000 printer, which, with the candor of a patient in a therapist’s office, he says led to his first divorce. “My new wife was not real happy with that purchase on the credit card, but it

turned out to be a real winner!” He then cashed out the winner, sold the staffing agency, and doubled down on the idea of making money as the middleman b/w creatives looking for work and the companies who would hire them. Like a grandparent showing children photos in his wallet, he flips through slides on the giant screens documenting the wild success of WriterAccess, an **online platform** where writers are paid as low as two pennies a word to create content marketing for corporate websites, email blasts, product launches.

Fifteen-thousand WriterAccess writers have created content for 25,000 clients over seven years. Earning \$7 million in annual revenue, 95 million words were transferred through WriterAccess in 2016. The industry with the second-largest growth on the platform is Spirituality, to which White asides, “Really? OK, whatever. The writers will take the work.”

The crowd shifts in their seats, perhaps restless in anticipation for Ann Handley, a popular figure in content marketing. White leaves the stage, Handley is greeted by a loud round of applause. White, female, 52, compact frame, she wears brown boots, knee-high, a blue dress, black glasses. A published author, she regularly appears on the speaker circuit. Her stage manner is scripted-conversational, like a one-act. “In reality, you guys are the Superheroes.” She’s here to make fresh the maxim that the focus for content marketers needs to be on quality, not quantity.

Handley tells the crowd about her recent viewing of a video on how to brew a great cup of coffee, produced by Blue Bottle Coffee. A lifelong coffee drinker, she nonetheless appreciated the density of information on bean grinding, flavor profiles, steep times. She flashes a selfie of herself up on the screens. She’s smiling, holding a bag of Blue Bottle coffee beans. The Blue Bottle video converted her into a Blue Bottle consumer because it “made me feel like I was a part of something,” she says. A white male, 40s, sitting beside the S.W., takes copious notes. Handley says, “This content was all about offering the consumer deep value. This wasn’t a five-ways-to-enjoy-coffee blog post, or a listicle—this was super-deep content that made me smarter.”

**‘Marketers are disruptive, pervasive, and not particularly well-liked. But that’s why we’re here, to make marketing that doesn’t suck.’**

Consumers and users are eager to be trained and educated, Handley tells the crowd. By creating content stories that fill this void, marketers are practicing “what I call pathological empathy. Which is next-level empathy. Not just ‘we understand you, we get you,’ but ‘we really get you.’” Handley pauses to let this sink in. “We’re not just walking around in your shoes—we’re walking around in your skin.”

The S.W. considers that the void Handley speaks of is in part the result of journalism's collapse. In the absence of stories told by humans to communicate about being human, companies tell people stories about being consumers. Readers consume the information made available to them in this way because they are unable to turn off the human impulse to understand the world.

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Opening ceremonies close with Sarah Hill, white, female, late 40s, tall, blond hair, sleeveless dress. She was for 20 years a broadcast journalist, recipient of the National Edward R. Murrow Award, before founding StoryUP. The S.W. is encouraged by the presence of a teller of human truths navigating the dynamic tension between journalistic ethics and stories that generate revenue. StoryUP **works in the virtual–reality space**, which Hill places for the audience in the long history of humans making narrative. “Virtual reality is an evolution of what we call human media. It used to be that we had cave drawings, that was how storytelling began. Then we had social media and text-based communication. Now we have virtual reality, where we jump inside the story.” Hill shows video from a virtual-reality film her company made in Africa. To properly view the film, one wears a \$500 headset. The potency of a medium that allows users to be fully immersed in a world of content is obvious to all; at critical mass, it will be a far superior sensory experience than the one being created out of words and videos on a screen, which Hill refers to as “flat media.”

The screen on the stage shows stunning footage of the African plains, waterways, people in a village. Hill explains that her company works primarily with charities and foundations because the virtual-reality content she's creating allows potential donors “to step inside those stories and give more support. So donors can now go to an African village and watch a crippled woman crawl around in the dirt because she can't afford a wheelchair. That's an experience you can feel in the headset. When you wear it, you feel like this woman is crawling toward you.”

After the opening ceremonies, conference guests move to the exhibit hallway to partake of pastries, fruit, and granola bars. StoryUP has a demo area where guests can experience the virtual-reality stories that Hill was showing on stage. While the S.W. waits in line, a young woman walks tentatively around the demo area with a pair of mixed-reality goggles. Hill pointedly encourages the young woman to take a selfie, then says she'll take the photo, presumably so that the young woman will post the photo to social media. The S.W. straps on a pair of mixed-reality goggles, and suddenly his field of vision includes a holograph of a spinning ballerina and a constellation of planets that appear to float in the room. He reaches out to touch the planets and his hand moves through them as if they are not there. He has wandered far from the demo area and when he returns, Hill tells him the goggles cost \$3,000.

Three guests are seated in swivel chairs wearing white virtual-reality headsets that cover half their faces. They tilt in their chairs, slowly pan their heads back and forth, lean back, arch their necks at sharp angles. They look like animals involved in a peculiar ritual that is still being fine-tuned. A young white male, 20s, with curly black hair, comes over to the S.W. He wears a crisp white button-down shirt tucked into khakis. He asks, “Would you like to experience virtual reality?” He leads the S.W. to an open chair. “And what will you be trying today?” The S.W. reviews the StoryUP menu on the table. Options include sitting on the wing of a flying plane, racing in a Lamborghini, Africa.

“I’ll try the Africa,” says the S.W.

“Africa it is. Excellent choice.” The young man offers the S.W. a pair of white wireless Apple AirPods. The S.W. moves his head around to take in the view from the lip of Mount Nyiragongo, an active stratovolcano. A male voiceover says, “There are people in the world who are giving their lives to save the Earth.” A black male in fatigues appears on the screen to say that the challenges in the Virunga National Park are renewable power. It cuts to a black woman in a colorful green skirt sitting beside an open fire, warming a pot of food.

The S.W. is able to pan around and see the woman’s home. The floor is dirt. He can almost touch cement and stones layered between pieces of wood. More young men in fatigues appear on the screen, now in front of what looks like an office building. The voice says, “More rangers’ lives would be saved with better communication.” The rangers are trying to prevent poachers from capturing gorillas. The S.W. is in the jungle. A gorilla now walks across the field of vision. The S.W. tilts his head away from the gorilla and stands amongst lush green foliage.

The young man explains that the video was a trailer for a longer video used to raise money for energy projects in the Congo. The S.W. says that it must be an effective fundraising tool. Smiling, the young man agrees. “It provides empathy for the donors, pulling them into a new experience they wouldn’t normally have access to.”

Following a pair of keynotes in which guests hear about how the viral is becoming more viral, and websites are mousetraps, and content the cheese, the S.W. heads to a session called “How to Create Truly Valuable Content.” The speaker is Melanie Deziel, female, white, late 20s. She wears dark jeans, sneakers, a fitted blazer. The room is full of guests, with some standing up in the back by the table with hotel stationery and pitchers of ice water.

Deziel begins by speaking about journalists. “We’re a strange bunch, to be sure,” she says. The jobs are hard to get, the hours bad, the pay is poor. People in power despise you. “But we have this allegiance to the truth, to tell authentic stories that people need to hear. Sometimes journalists are called the Fourth Estate, the voice for the voiceless. We believe we’re Superheroes to begin with.”

The S.W. wonders if Deziel is a practicing journalist, until she clarifies her current occupation. “But that’s what made it a tough transition for me. Journalism is essentially the opposite of marketing. In marketing, you’re generally giving people something they don’t want when they’re trying to do something else. Marketers are disruptive, pervasive, and not particularly well-liked. But that’s why we’re here, to make marketing that doesn’t suck.”

Deziel tells the story of how she went to journalism school, worked as an art critic, and became an investigative journalist before becoming a professional content marketer. “A lot of my colleagues in journalism told me I had sold out, gone to the dark side. That I was using my skills for evil instead of good.” The audience laughs. Deziel says though that while “my job title changed to Brand Content Strategist, my mission was still the same.” Slowing her cadence to emphasize the point, she says, “I was helping them become the kind of people we wanted them to become, as part of a better society and as a better customer.”

The question you have to ask yourself then, she says, is, “Why does someone want to hear this content?” To answer that question, Deziel relies upon Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. “Because this works for every brand and every company, we’re going to test it live to show how it would work for a brand you know.” Deziel asks the crowd to volunteer a brand. After a pause, a white male, 40s, thinning brown hair, says, “A friend of mine has a company that sells coaching to men between the ages of 30 and 50 who are very successful at work but whose lives are falling apart at home.”

“All right,” Deziel says, unfazed. “So we have coaching for men who are advancing their careers but maybe have a little trouble at home. Let’s first look at the base of Maslow’s Needs. Here we have basic human necessity. Eating, drinking, sleeping. Your customers have these needs.” She looks to the man. “From a coaching perspective, are these men in a dangerous situation? Do they have health problems? Or is it just family-type issues?”

“Sometimes it is a health issue, obesity or something, where they run the risk of dying. But often, it’s the wife saying, ‘You never spend time with us’ or the kids are not talking to their father, just keeping their heads down looking at a screen.”

Deziel looks satisfied that she’s identified where this brand falls into Maslow’s Hierarchy. “So that’s going to play a lot more into our family love and bonding as we move up the pyramid.” Before moving on to love, Deziel wants the crowd to think about fear and safety. “Protecting our resources—this is where fear comes into play. You can acknowledge that consumers have fear about the well-being of their families and the resources they’ve worked hard to obtain. You can play into this realm without tapping directly into the fear.”

At *The New York Times* “T Brand” content-marketing studio where Deziel worked, they created content stories for brands like Volvo and Showtime. The insurance company Farmers sponsored an interactive T Brand story. Here, Deziel says, “the story shows a family home, so you could see all the risk areas that you might not have thought of.” She does not separate the reader’s desire to go online for news stories from the desire of the sponsoring insurance company to activate that reader’s inherent fear that something tragic could happen to their loved ones. Because the reader has an inherent fear of tragedy, Deziel assumes that the reader should thus have an inherent need for insurance. The shift from using narrative that seeks to understand fear to narrative that seeks to leverage that fear is subtle. One helps you become a more thoughtful person, the other helps you buy flood insurance.

The Farmers content story shows a suburban home with a green lawn, minivan, and white picket fence. Clicking on different areas activates different messages. Clicking on the minivan’s child car seat activates a panel that says 30 percent of households have no life insurance whatsoever, implying that uninsured parents could die and leave nothing behind for their orphaned child.

Deziel moves on to a content story for Dixie Cups, which discusses the importance of family activities like games and watching movies to increase feelings of togetherness. Deziel tells the man with the friend who runs the company offering coaching services to men with lives falling apart at home that this is the kind of content that would work for him.

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Upon returning home, the S.W. will deposit \$50 into an account on WriterAccess to hire two writers to research the current state of content marketing and the decline of journalism. More than 40 writers will send messages pitching their qualifications to take on the assignments. The portal is well-designed and easy to navigate. The S.W. will choose four-star writers on a scale of six stars and pay 8 cents a word, with 70 percent of the fee going to a former broadcast journalist and a bar-approved lawyer who are bestowed with the task. Content marketing is expected to be worth \$313 billion dollars by 2019, with more than 50 percent of all corporations assigning executive-level staff to oversee content marketing. Between 1990 and 2016, the number of people working in newspapers and magazines declined by more than half. Compared to their counterparts in content, journalists now earn 65 cents on the dollar. Along with her findings, the lawyer notes that her research “paints an interesting picture.” She asks the S.W., how can writers “sustain themselves in this gig economy? And how does this affect society’s relationship to communication and knowledge?”

Across the hallway from Deziel’s session, a female, white, late 30s, leads a workshop on “Building the Brand Newsroom From Scratch.” Each speaker has a proprietary paradigm for seeing the world as a content marketer, with self-help-styled systems for business practices that they themselves as consultants and marketing-agency owners are specialized in performing. The 7 Deadly Content Marketing Sins, 9 Ways to Improve Your Brand Voice. Here with Margaret Magnarelli, the senior director of marketing at Monster, it’s 5 Newsroom Principals.

Magnarelli draws on her own experience in journalism as an executive editor of *Money* magazine to implement the principals in the Brand Newsroom she runs out of Monster. Overseeing three content managers and one writer, the team produces 12 to 15 content stories a week. She says, “It’s much easier to hire a journalist and teach them content marketing than to teach a content marketer to do journalism.”

**‘Not just “we understand you, we get you” but “we really get you.” We’re not just walking around in your shoes, we’re walking around in your skin.’**

She asks the room to raise their hand if they have trained or worked professionally in journalism. A dozen guests raise their hands. “That’s because it’s really hard to do journalism right now,” she says. Magnarelli tells the room the story of a staff writer at *Fortune* magazine who was laid off like many others by a print publication struggling to pay the bills with dwindling print advertising. Magnarelli hired her at a great price, and when they published her pieces for Monster, they were sold and published back to *Fortune* through a syndication service. With the money the magazine could save on a staff writer and make up for at a cheaper cost by buying pieces in syndication, the magazine was



able to publish the stories by the writer. The only difference was that the magazine was now publishing the brand's content marketing.

During a 30-minute scheduled snack break, the conference guests gather in the hallway of the exhibit to eat chocolate cookies and bars of candy. Some guests are clearly seasoned veterans of the multiple-day-professional-conference experience. A female, white, 20s, carries with her a pink inflatable seat cushion to enhance the comfort of the chairs many will sit in for upward of 11 hours of speaker presentations. Others have portable battery chargers to revive their cellphones. Near the candy bar table there are cardboard cutouts of neon green Superheroes missing their heads. People go up and stick their head in the void while their colleagues snap photos. A white male, bald, 50s, leans down awkwardly with his hands on his knees and his belly hanging over his belted khakis while a female, white, 30s, in a pink sweater laughs at the male, good-naturedly joking that he's never looked so muscular in his life.

Down by the lobby, the S.W. runs into Deziel. After growing up in a single-parent home, Deziel was the first person in her family to go to college. As a journalism student, she'd told a campus newspaper that "there's a disconnect between where my family comes from and the life I have on campus." She'd worked several jobs during school to help defray the costs, and afterward found it difficult to make ends meet as a journalist. The S.W. asks her how she found the transition to working in content marketing.

Deziel says when she started, she did some projects that were difficult for her to be proud of, but over time, the work became more like journalism: reporting on leads, writing characters. It also became less taboo in journalism, as many journalists have been laid off and become more aware of the financial reality of making news. "Now the ones who still work in journalism have to manage and maintain their social-media profiles to help promote their work and the magazine. They have to help keep the lights on," she says. Being a journalist today requires the maintenance of an active presence on the same social-media platforms and search engines that took away all the advertising dollars that once supported journalism. Today, 80 percent of all new digital advertisements are booked through Facebook and Google. The journalists are curating their work on behalf of these stock-traded corporations that thrive by selling advertisements against work they have not commissioned. Everyone ultimately works for the social-media platforms.

The S.W. asks Deziel if she misses publishing journalism. "It's my core being, my soul," she says. "But I get to scratch that itch again. I've been doing columns about content marketing for magazines."

On Thursday morning, Byron White is mingling in the exhibit hall wearing his green blazer over the black CMC T-shirt. Down in the lobby, the S.W. reads books given out by the conference speakers who wrote them. Nearby, a female, 30s, white, sits on the edge of a couch with her phone plugged into an outlet near the floor. She's hunched over her phone, scrolling Facebook. Her upper body is awkwardly tilted, almost parallel to the floor; her long brown hair falls off her shoulders, creating a dome around the phone. The screen is glowing from within. The swiftly changing photographs radiate a kaleidoscopic stream of colors that project light upon her hair.

Josh Bernoff, who will lead an afternoon keynote called “End Toxic Content,” joins the S.W. to discuss his most recent **book**, *Writing Without Bullshit*. Bernoff is a kind of elder statesman in content marketing. In 2008 he had co-authored *Groundswell*, a best-selling book that offered an analytic approach for businesses to leverage online consumer behavior during the early days of social media. In his 50s, white, male, with a round face, wire-rimmed glasses, and a neatly trimmed beard, Bernoff has the relaxed, thoughtful demeanor of a tenured professor during office hours. He almost went the academic route after excelling at math as a student. Accepted to Princeton, he went to the more affordable Penn State, and then on to MIT to study logic on a National Science Foundation scholarship. He left the doctoral program to work for Software Arts, the company that created the first spreadsheet, before joining Forrester as an analyst for 20 years. His book is the result of having written tens of thousands of words for reports, manuals, and technical documentation.

Bernoff is on something of a crusade to rid the world of poorly conceived writing, from emails to web copy, bringing a rigorous approach to language that is clear about its purpose and intent. One reviewer called the book *The Elements of Style* for the online era, and the authoritative, scolding tone is not far off from Strunk & White. On his **blog**, Bernoff posts every day about the way in which language is used or abused by politicians, companies, and public figures. On average, he writes 1,000 words in less than an hour and a half. “I consider myself an expert in how people or corporate environments use language to lie or tell the truth about what they’re trying to do,” he says. “It’s not about if Donald Trump is right or wrong, if what he’s doing is reprehensible or correct. It’s about if he did actually talk about religion in an executive order, or if it’s self-contradictory, or if it hides intent rather than if it’s good or bad from a liberal or conservative perspective.”

The S.W. shares Bernoff’s interest in elevating the quality of the written language that dominates our interactions over email, between leaders and citizens, people, and profiles. He asks Bernoff, “What happens when what they’re writing about is itself bullshit? What if the brand or politician has a bullshit quality to what they’re trying to sell?”

Bernoff pauses for a moment. “If you’re attempting to fool people, then perhaps my book is not the book for you. What I like to believe is that every company has some sort of honest advantage to their product or service, and if they describe it honestly, people will become interested in it. And if you think about content marketing, that’s really what it’s about. If you’re completely ordinary, or, worse yet, awful and evil, maybe you can’t get away with writing without bullshit.”

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In the afternoon, the S.W. watches the simulcast of Bernoff’s keynote from an auxiliary conference room. The large round tables are draped in white linen, like at a wedding. He’s joined at the table by Ketan, who needs to catch up on work email. He has four books in his hands from the speakers. “It’s a lot of information,” he says.

On a large television sitting on a wheeled cart, Josh Bernoff comes onto the black stage, the CMC letters glowing beside him. Behind the television, 25-foot-tall glass windows look out onto the edge of Boston, office buildings and restaurants with the harbor glistening in the distance. There’s an odd effect created by the entire keynote being captured on a screen that hovers against the skyline backdrop, as if compared to a city built up over a few hundred years, the digital city we’re now living

in is still small and young, the laws being written, the modern dialect formalized, the code of conduct and culture still up for debate. While the S.W. is concerned that this environment is increasingly hostile to writing that lacks a profitable agenda, he is even more concerned that the audience reading content marketing doesn't care.

Bernoff opens his keynote with a story about Ernest Rutherford, the early 20th-century scientist. "People knew there were atoms, but they didn't know what was inside them," Bernoff tells the crowd. On the screen, Bernoff shows a diagram of Rutherford's experiment to understand an atom's internal structure. Inside a disc-shaped apparatus, Rutherford used uranium to emit alpha particles toward an extremely thin piece of gold foil. Most of the particles went through the gold foil and could be seen on the far wall, while a small fraction of the particles were deflected against the other side of the apparatus. Rutherford was shocked by the implications, Bernoff says, because that meant that only a small portion of the gold atom constituted the gold's nucleus, and the rest was space.

"Rutherford looked around him and realized the tables in the lab were empty space," he explains. "That the apparatus was made up of almost nothing. That his colleagues were not solidly there, just emptiness. I tell this story because that's how I felt after looking at text for 35 years. That the language we're consuming every day is empty space, it's nothing-ness, it's meaningless-ness, it's all bullshit."

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*Sean Patrick Cooper is a writer living in Philadelphia.*



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