Interview with Kiren Shoman, SAGE Publishing

For podcast release

Monday, April 9, 2018

KENNEALLY: The challenge of digital transformation requires a publisher to redefine and reimagine the experiences of customers, employees, and other stakeholders even as the organization relies on the underlying technology solution.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book.

This week at the 2018 London Book Fair, Kiren Shoman, editorial director for Sage Publishing in London, joins me and a panel of publishers and technologists to share stories of innovation in publishing. On stage with Shoman on Wednesday, 11 April, at 1300 (1 p.m.) are Jonathan Brett-Harris, Managing Director, Ixxus; Kathryn Earle, Managing Director, Digital Resources Division, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.; Dr. Junaid Mubeen, Director of Education at Whizz Education; and John Newton, CTO and Founder, Alfresco.

To preview the discussion later this week at Olympia Hall, Kiren Shoman joins me now from London. Kiren, welcome.

SHOMAN: Thanks, Chris. It's great to be here.

KENNEALLY: Well, we're looking forward to speaking with you, Kiren, because there's a lot to cover as digital transformation rewrites the rules in book publishing of all kinds, and you're particularly concerned with academic book publishing and higher education. So I want to ask you first about your viewpoint, having been at SAGE for a number of years, on just how digital transformation is transforming not only your business, but the pursuit of education – higher education particularly.

SHOMAN: Thank you. It's a good question, sort of trying to think through what do we mean by digital transformation, because there's been a lot of work going on in terms of the digital landscape for a while now, but it seems right now that it's gathering pace. And I think, from my perspective, I kind of boil it down in terms of how I'm thinking about it into three areas.

On the one hand, it's really thinking about new opportunities that digital brings to serve market needs, and what are we doing in response to that? On the second hand, it's enabling us to do something quite different in terms of market-making and seeking out ways of learning by doing and finding a path that digital can perhaps help get us to where we want to go more quickly. And then thirdly, just always remembering the reason that we're here. As you said, we're an academic publisher. We're a mission-driven academic publisher, and we see our mission as encapsulated by thinking of ourselves as providing bridges to knowledge, making sure that we're doing a really good job of helping to transfer ideas from the minds of the creators into the minds of the users, be they students or lecturers or even librarians.

So for me, that's how I think we can think about it are those three different ways, and then trying to understand what then are new digital ways of publishing that we would put underneath of those three labels.

KENNEALLY: Well, I want to ask you to compare and contrast your work at an academic publisher with trade book publishers. Many people are familiar with – or more familiar, I should say – with the trade book world than with the academic world, unless they happen to be at the university right now. What are the differences and what are the similarities, as you see it?

SHOMAN: That's a good question. I think one of the key differences that the academic world has to be much more conscious of and work with that the trade, I would suggest, doesn't, is that we have a number of gatekeepers that we also need to be persuasive of our value. So by gatekeepers, I mean often our customer has to be defined in different ways. So on the one hand, it could be literally the end user, and in a pedagogical environment, you would say, well, that's the student. But sometimes it's not – and most often, it's not – the student that's making the determination as to whether what we're publishing is going to be used by them. That determination is being made by the lecturer or the faculty member or let's say the adopter. And in some cases, it's dependent on the institution or even the academic who themselves perhaps is being told what material to use to teach the student.

I think in a trade environment, particularly in, let's say, publishing novels, you are marketing to a very diverse, it's true, world, but you are looking to reach into – spark the interest in the actual individual possible purchaser. Whereas with us, we have a lot of different layers that we need to go through to secure, if you like, that recognition of value of what we're publishing.

KENNEALLY: It sounds like, in fact, it's a bit of a juggling act, because I would imagine those very different parties have different views of what they want and particularly different views of digital publishing.

SHOMAN: That's true. That's true. So we have very different levels of engagement and different types of, if you like, end user. You see that a lot in the tech world, don't you? There are the people who are 100% committed to the most new, most innovative, the bells and the whistles, and then you have a lot of the market which is tentative, not necessarily persuaded, and in many, many cases just too busy doing what they're doing already to be changing a lot of their practices and going down these new routes that digital is offering them. So yes, it's a hard juggle for us, being sure that we're not overwhelming with stuff that's perhaps not ready for the majority of the people that actually need the resources that we're hoping to give them.

KENNEALLY: And you mentioned at the start that your mission is critical to you. SAGE is a highly regarded global publisher of social science works, and so you're committed to scholarship, to research, to advancing those particular fields. How does all of this affect that effort?

SHOMAN: That's a good question, because I think one of the opportunities that we have as an academic and as a scholarly publisher, and particularly we're an independent publisher, so we get to do some stuff that we can try for future that we don't have to justify to people who aren't publishers. It's set up by Sarah Miller McCune, our publisher herself, who started the company and has remained true to making sure that we're always remembering that mission. So that means that we can be trying new things, but also we're trying to continue a tradition that she started, which was being able to recognize new opportunities and new ways in which disciplines were developing.

In social sciences particularly, I think the latest example right now that we're heavily, if you like, involved in is thinking about new subject areas coming up around computational social science. How do researchers need new tools – particularly need to engage with big data to do better research and to be able to

deliver on their own mission of making new knowledge claims? So I think as an academic social science publisher, we get to do that particularly in our book publishing, and in STM, we're also highly involved more in the journal publishing. But yeah, finding new subject areas I think would be an exciting evidence of where we are right now.

KENNEALLY: How much of the work you do there at SAGE, Kiren, is about creating entirely new content, and how much of it is thinking about existing content and repurposing it in new ways?

SHOMAN: There's a lot of – yeah, there's different publishers who answer in different ways right now. Our answer is that we are still highly invested in new content, and we see our place in the market is telling us that the world hasn't shifted away from needing new inputs and new insights and new ways of expressing. So we're not about saying, OK, well, we've done a great amount of publishing so far. Let's just see what we could do with that stuff that we have. I'll tell you what – if we pour it out into a different medium, it can do something, and that's good enough for us.

We recognize the value of the content that we've traditionally published and that we have, if you like, in store – our backlist and so forth. But our frontlist publishing is still very aggressive. We are still very much making sure that we are publishing new editions of books that are yet untested in the market, but that we still want to test.

So for us, finding also new types of new content – so not just thinking about books, but also thinking about case studies. A part of our program is publishing a series of business case studies. Another part is publishing a product which is research methods cases for new researchers or strong researchers who want to find other examples of how a particular research question might have been answered and carried through, and what challenges are received and so forth. So commissioning new content around those new, if you like, content types, as well as the traditional content types that we might be better associated with.

KENNEALLY: Right. And those new content types – in the past, publishing was about putting type on the page, and today, of course, it's about a great many other things. So as you approach the publishing process, this adds to the layers that you described earlier, because you're not simply working with the highest-quality research, but thinking about the ways that you need to tag it, enrich it, do the kinds of things that will make it repurpose-able, discoverable, all of these things.

SHOMAN: Absolutely. That's the place where it starts to bring home the truth about – a lot of conversation can also happen around, oh, it's digital, so it should be free, or it's cheaper. But actually, it has given us whole new challenges and new workflows and new even divisions within the organization that are particularly set up to be doing user testing and to be improving our SEO. Yes, you're absolutely right. It's giving us a whole new world, but a whole new world of challenges that we have to make sure that we're good enough to overcome.

KENNEALLY: Now, does this require you at SAGE to partner with technology providers? Are you always having to keep an eye out on what Google is up to or what some of the leading platforms are up to?

SHOMAN: The answer's totally, yes. And I think one of the things underneath of that – that remembering who we are and that our mission and our bridges to knowledge – one of the things that we also recognize that sits underneath that, and it's a traditional part of being a publisher, is recognizing the value of relationships. And whereas perhaps traditionally, relationships are about the author, the academic, the bookseller, the librarian, you're right – technology partners are now a big part of the community that we need to make sure that we're really plugged in with.

KENNEALLY: Right, and when it's brought up, big data is sort of presented as the solution to everything, but data itself isn't very helpful to us. It's just bits and bytes. Information is critical, and that's true for researchers, for readers, for people in publishing. They want to know what's really behind the data or what the data is trying to tell them. How do you confront that problem, knowing what the data is telling you?

SHOMAN: That's where we bring in and we would expect the academic researcher that gets access to that data, but also has access to the tools that help them process, understand, and use that data to help answer the big social science questions that they might have. Some of the examples that come out of that might be understanding censorship in China and exactly how does it work. By looking at data that you can see, that you can download, if you have the right resources and the right skillset to be able to properly process that data, you can come out with some stronger knowledge claims around exactly what is happening. So it takes it back into the understanding through theory or through looking at actual practice.

So it's not just about what's out there as big baggy loads of numbers, but how to process that and how to make it make sense within what can be quite wicked problems that only social scientists can really try to engage with, bringing in the different disciplines that you might need to understand human behavior and what inspires people to act in certain ways, be it sociologists or psychologists or political scientists having access. This was a theme that was really coming out quite strongly from those sessions, was academics saying we have big questions that all of this data can help us answer more quickly, whereas in the past, they might have needed a team of 300 researchers and taken 25 years to do something that now can be processed much quicker and that they can actually have some scientific results to speak of within months or years.

KENNEALLY: So as a publisher, you're publishing the analysis, the research that has resulted from working with the data, but you're also publishing the data. Is that right?

SHOMAN: Well, in this case, we have the facility to be publishing data. We are publishing data. But I'm not saying that we get to publish everybody's data. I think that's about people who are prepared to let us house their data. But the other ways in which we are involved is, for instance, new types of publishing. So thinking about ourselves as market-making, it enables us to have material to share in new ways. So traditional book publishing, sure. Journal publishing, sure. But also now into our video collections. So enabling our video products as a way in which people can learn about the challenges of these technologies or these massive amounts of data that can be useful.

Another thing that we're doing is understanding the need of researchers to learn the skills and seeing ourselves especially as a strong research methods publisher, so enabling our customers to, through us, take online courses that give them better skills, in that they're understanding how to use Python or understanding how to use R or understanding how to think about data visualization. So those would be ways in which I guess it's worth saying that – back to us as keeping the relationships going as to what do our traditional and nontraditional customers want out of us as a publisher, and not being afraid of trying these new, if you like, digital delivery methods for this transmission of knowledge.

KENNEALLY: Finally, Kiren Shoman at SAGE Publishing, I want to ask you about something you mentioned just in passing but I don't want to let go without focusing on for just a moment, and that is video production. This is an area that SAGE has

been making some important new strides in. I wonder what challenges that represents for you, because working in video, working with sound, moving images – very different than working with print and text.

SHOMAN: Yeah, it's been a wonderful learning curve for us. I think where we started from was recognizing the increasing amount of ways in which video is being used in higher education, and that's our core environment. That's our market. So the research that we were doing, which we've been doing again this year and finding that it continues to be true, if not more so, that students are using video for their own learning purposes. But are they using it within the classroom because faculty want to use video, because it enables them to do some different or even better explications of what they're talking about, or setting it through that flipped classroom model and so on and so forth?

You could see a real change brewing, and there were already some providers of video, but particularly a lot of providers of documentaries and so forth. But what we decided we felt that our market wanted was an opportunity for lots of different types of video that was much more linked in with learning objectives. As we see ourselves as a pedagogical publisher, we had a lot of access to not just academics, but also students to understand what would be a better way of delivering video to them.

So we developed this idea of taking a subject area and really exploding it into hundreds of different data points and learning objectives and metadata. Then we would be thinking, well, how could we explain that individual better, and what style would we use? Do we want a case study? Do we want to do a mini-documentary? Do we want to have an interview panel? Do we want to have an argument between two academics? Do we just want a tutorial? And we had tutorial advisory boards in each subject area. So that kicked us off.

So I think we felt quite confident in the content, but you're spot on that the new challenges were posed to us in terms of production values, understanding the need for pace, and really getting ourselves clear on what level of animations, for instance, would help students to really grasp the different topics in a much better way.

KENNEALLY: It's all storytelling. It's just how you tell the story.

SHOMAN: Correct. That's true.

KENNEALLY: Kiren, so I understand, these videos – you got hundreds of them, some of them focused on research methods and various other fields. They are published within the journals on their websites. They are published on YouTube or all of the above and more?

SHOMAN: No, they're published as individual collections within a subject area – for instance, sociology or criminology or psychology or political science – and they are sold as packages to the library of higher education institutions, so university libraries. That way, all of the students and all of the patrons, if you like – faculty, as well – have access to them through the library. So they can plug them into their LMSs, they can set them as assignments, they can discover them on their own individual learning paths. But basically, they have, if you like – access at the point of use is free to distribute it to a lecturer, but of course our transactional partner is the librarian.

KENNEALLY: We have been speaking with Kiren Shoman. She's the editorial director at SAGE Publishing. Kiren, thank you so much for talking with me.

SHOMAN: It's been a pleasure, Chris. Thanks a lot for having me.

KENNEALLY: Beyond the Book is produced by Copyright Clearance Center, a global leader in content management, discovery, and document delivery solutions. Through its relationships with those who use and create content, CCC and its subsidiaries RightsDirect and Ixxus drive market-based solutions that accelerate knowledge, power publishing, and advance copyright.

Beyond the Book co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Join us again soon on Beyond the Book.

END OF FILE