

Beyond the Book

A Podcast Series on the Business of Writing and Publishing

[France Gets Its E-Book Moment](#)

Virginie Clayssen, Digital Development Director, [Editis](#)

Interviewed by Christopher Kenneally,

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Q: We're attending the second annual Digital Book World conference in New York City in January, 2011. And it is very much a digital book world, as we have attendees here from not only U.S. publishing houses but from those around the world, including in Europe.

Joining me on *Beyond the Book* right now is Virginie Clayssen, who is digital development manager for Editis, one of the largest French publishing groups. And bonjour. Welcome to *Beyond the Book*, Virginie.

A: Bonjour. It's nice to be there.

Q: It's nice to have you join us. And we're going to try to help people understand some of the comparisons and the contrasts in the market experience from the U.S. to Europe. You've been involved with digital development not only at Editis but for your career going back some number of years, so none of this is very new to you. But I noticed on one of your tweets recently – and you're an active tweeter and blogger – that you were kind of rolling your eyes when someone said, please explain metadata again. Is it really necessary to explain metadata again?

A: Yes. I was quite surprised to hear this question. But in France we would have this question too, because for people involved in digital for years, it's very evident – the necessity of good metadata and what they are. But we have to explain this and explain again to publishers.

Q: Well that's the thing that seems to be coming evident here is that publishing is now very much a technology business. Would you agree?

A: Yes, I agree. But it's a little different in France. We are a little behind, because in France the e-book market is just emergent. We are in the beginning, for some reasons I can explain. The first one is we didn't have in France the Kindle effect,

Beyond the Book

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because connected e-readers are just arriving in France. We have one now, but it's very new.

The second reason is the catalogue of e-books was not very developed. And it's changing and publishers and digitizing and making books digitally available now, but to begin a market we have to – it's important to have a consistent offer. It's just appearing now.

So the third reason is that traditionally in France, distribution is controlled by publishing groups themselves, so publishers also want to control e-distribution. They have built platforms, and there are some platforms in France, and it's not very easy for bookseller to connect to the different platforms. But I think this year will be maybe the year one of a real market for e-books in France.

Q: Well one of the other characteristics of the French book market – and I believe this is true in other countries in Europe – is the control that the publishers have over pricing. And of course that has an impact with the e-books because it's really very much a difference how one prices print books and e-books. Perhaps you can tell *Beyond the Book* listeners about that. What is the control in place right now, and how is that playing a role in the adoption of e-books?

A: Yes. It's a big issue. French publishers have a law to protect the price of books – of printed books. This law is here from 30 years. But this law doesn't apply to e-books. So it's – we'll have a special law for a unique price of e-books. It's coming in some weeks. It's going on now. And maybe publishers were waiting for this law before going to digital very strongly because it's very important for them to control the price.

But we saw that in U.S.A., publishers also want to control e-books' price because of the very aggressive politic of resellers about very low prices, and they fought to have the agency model. In France maybe we don't need agency because we'll have the law on controlling – publishers controlling price.

Q: Well the other aspect of control the publishers are always concerned about, of course, is the control of the intellectual property they have – their copyright. And a question that is of great concern to us at Copyright Clearance Center too is how one manages those rights effectively in a marketplace.

Perhaps you can give us some perspective on how the European publishing community views that challenge – the challenge of copyright and the challenge of protection of intellectual property in this digital age.

Beyond the Book

A Podcast Series on the Business of Writing and Publishing

- A: European and French publishers are very attached to the copyright. The name is not exactly copyright in France because there are – and in Europe, because there are some difference. But we try with all our organizations, European publishers association and French publishers association, to protect these rights.

There are a lot of fights against it coming from people thinking it is no more a good thing in the digital age, but publishers think it's very important to protect this. It's a question of freedom to attach a work to an author and to be sure of this link. And it's up to authors to decide if they want to share their work. And I like evolutions of some things – for example, Creative Commons and things like this – but it's up to the authors to decide if they want to use this, and it has not to be imposed to them.

- Q: Well that raises inevitably the Google book settlement with which the French government and French publishers became actively involved. And of course it's all still up in the air right now, sitting on the desk of Judge Chin here in New York City, and we'll have to wait for him to tell us what he thinks.

But tell us, in summary, what the French publishing community's reaction was to the proposed settlement.

- A: French publishers rejected this settlement for several reasons. One reason is they were not happy with Google digitizing content without permission of right owners. A second reason is to think it's maybe it's not a very good thing to have a global library completely controlled by a private company, even if we love this company and we have nothing against Google, but in the principle. Maybe this big, big project to make out-of-print books available for the public has to be managed by public institutions and not by a private company.

There is a real risk of monopoly on orphan works, though we are very sensitive about these questions and we have now a project with French government to build a solution for to make available out-of-print French works, and it's a big project, and we are hard working on it to do this in the next years.

- Q: Well of course French literary culture is one of the great treasures of the world. And to protect it and to allow it to continue to grow and evolve is of course one of the missions of publishers. Talk about the challenges in the digital age. You're the digital development director for Editis, and a variety of imprints come under that umbrella. How difficult is it – and are you thinking about this – something that is not a commercial interest, this notion of culture, as you go about the business you're in?

Beyond the Book

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A: Yes. The change is not only a commercial change or just a change of support of – on which kind of support we are reading or we are – and to sell files and not only print objects is not the beginning and the end of the subject. All the change, in my opinion, is coming from the Web and from this extreme facility to share ideas and to link people together.

And this affects, in my opinion, the way authors are working – that they don't work the same anymore. They can get informations in real time on the Web. They can be connected with other authors. They can be connected with their readers. And we have in France a very active authors' community on the Web – a literary blogosphere. You can find very interesting exchanges and writings. Authors are blogging in a very interesting way. Some of French intellectuals still are against this and very proud to say, I don't have a computer, I don't own a mobile, and it's the end of the literary life and of the thinking of humanity.

But it's, I think, it – there are no more very strong. And it's not sustainable. I don't like this idea of the author alone in his room writing and nobody knows what he's doing. I think we are in a connected world. And you can be very – you can have a very deep thinking and be a real author and also communicate and be linking to – link it to other people.

Q: Well French literary culture always was about gathering together in cafés and sharing ideas. And now they're gathering together in the blogosphere, it sounds to me.

A: Yeah. We said sometimes there is like the salon in the 18th century – there is a literary life online – and also in café. It's – we still have this, yes. And sometimes there are the same people exchanging ideas and trying to share their thoughts online and after that meeting in the real life.

Q: So it's not either-or. It's a both?

A: Yeah. Yeah, I agree.

Q: We've been chatting in a very busy media room at Digital Book World 2011 with Virginie Clayssen, the digital development manager of Editis, one of the largest French publishing houses. And merci beaucoup, Virginie.

A: Merci. It was nice to be there.

Q: Well we enjoyed having you on beyond the book. This is Chris Kenneally. For everyone at Copyright Clearance Center – wishing you a great day.

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