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Beyond the Book

A podcast series on the business of writing and publishing

Interview with Brian O’Leary [Magellan Media Partners](#)

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KENNEALLY: The content explosion characteristic of the Digital Age is reshaping media in every form. Once inhabitants of disparate worlds, musicians and authors today find themselves in the same global game, where creation and distribution are easy, but monetary reward comes slow and painfully.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center’s podcast series, “Beyond the Book.” My name is Christopher Kenneally. In our day, an abundance of content has made success in the marketing and sale of books, music, and even film a greater challenge than ever. Lessons learned in one field are worth sharing.

We’re in New York, talking again with Brian O’Leary, founder and principal of Magellan Media Partners. Brian, welcome back to *Beyond the Book*.

O’LEARY: It’s always a pleasure to talk with you, Chris.

KENNEALLY: We look forward to it. When we get to New York, we try to search you out, and we are going to talk today about a recent blog entry of yours taking a look at some of the parallels between the experience that musicians have had working on their own, independently, and what authors are finding in the self-publishing world.

You were sort of riffing on an article coming out of *Publishers Weekly*, and there were four main lessons that you and the original author of the piece, Alex Palmer, talked about. It’s been pointed out before that there are parallels. But before we get into the details, how strong a case is there that there is a similarity in what’s happening in the book publishing world and what happened 10 years ago, or began to happen 10 years ago, in music?

O’LEARY: It seems like there’s a fair amount of similarity between those two different industries, even though they work and operate in different realms. Music has kind of led the way in a lot of ways, because it was disintermediated quite before that.

But the four lessons, I think, that Alex Palmer drew out in a piece that appeared in *Publishers Weekly* – the first of which was that barriers to entry for both musicians and authors are much lower, and I think that’s incontrovertible. It’s really clear right now that if you’re an independent musician, there are lots of different ways to



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get your music out. That's also true for self-published authors. It's never been easier to get a book published than it is today.

KENNEALLY: But since the barriers to entry have gone down, there are consequences that flow from that. Everybody's in it now.

O'LEARY: There is an abundance of content. There's no ambiguity there. That makes, actually, the act of marketing a much bigger piece of the puzzle. Both independent musicians, as well as self-published authors, have reported trouble balancing, in fact, the act of creating – creating music, creating a book, writing – with the act of essentially getting found, and discovered, and promoting your work. That's work that has traditionally been done by established companies – music labels as well as traditional publishers. When you're self-published or independent, more and more of that work shifts to the person who's created the work.

KENNEALLY: In the piece in *PW* that you were discussing in your blog, the author interviewed a musician, a man who had been both a musician and is now a book author, and he talked about a Kickstarter campaign which helped to fund some of his marketing and some of his other activities. At least he recognized that there was some work to be done beyond the book itself.

O'LEARY: True. The third lesson learned that came out in the article is that discovery of a creative work is a persistent challenge in these two fields. What he did with respect to the Kickstarter campaign is use it for two purposes – one, to get enough money to buy him some time so that he could finish writing the book, which he was successful in doing. But the second was to build awareness among a fan community, both the latent and the old fan community, that he was working on a book, and that something was going to come out. In effect, he was doing pre-marketing for that work.

KENNEALLY: As I sit here thinking about the parallels between music and book publishing, talking with Brian O'Leary of Magellan Media Partners, I wonder whether the musicians actually have it a little easier than the book authors do. First of all, the consumer purchases music differently than they do for books, and the expectation that musicians have is different than for book authors.

You make a song in an afternoon. We've just passed the 50th anniversary of the Beatles recording the entire first album they made, *Please Please Me*, in a single day's worth of recording. That could be done. You can't write a book in a single day.

O'LEARY: Well, I like to think that the Beatles probably did a little bit of work before they went into the studio, but your point stands. I think that the creative process for both music and books is fundamentally different. However, I think that one of the



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things that music does have an advantage of, at least at this moment, but does play a role for both printed as well as musical works, is that the depth of connection with an audience is a key component of actually making your work known and successful.

Cory Doctorow not too long ago in a post wrote, in effect, that you can't live on fame alone, but it's really hard to make any money if you don't have at least some of it. Musicians have a leg up in that regard, because they do perform. They do have an act that they can take on the road. They can be heard in small doses, as opposed to reading an entire printed work. For authors, the barriers to entry may be low, but the barriers to discovery sometimes seem much higher. That's a problem I don't know that we've solved just yet.

KENNEALLY: There's a fourth point to talk about, and then we also want to add kind of a coda, which is the return of vinyl to the music world. What's the fourth one?

O'LEARY: The fourth one really is that connection with community. It's important that people feel in some way, shape, or form a connection to you as an author, to you as a musician – that they see themselves in your work. Then, you could send a message virally in a way that is really not possible for somebody who's either unknown or doesn't have a fan base.

KENNEALLY: These are almost jargon-y terms, but from scarcity to abundance – if you're an author today, you want your work to be abundant, don't you, rather than scarce?

O'LEARY: They aren't buzzwords to me. I live somewhere in the continuum between scarce and abundant. I think that you want your work to be well-known, and visible, and available everywhere, but you're battling the abundance of lots of other creative works that are obviously competing for your fan base's time, interest, and attention.

KENNEALLY: Give us some perspective for the publishers here. They must be watching a bit fearfully as authors take on more independence, and yet their businesses rely upon the authors, so they'll want to keep them. What are some things that publishers ought to be thinking about as this happens?

O'LEARY: Some of the examples have already been played out with authors like Amanda Hocking, who started more or less independently and then was signed by a larger imprint, traditional publisher. That you can use self-publishing as a bit of a farm team to reduce risk. In effect, rather than taking a lot of bets, you use your marketing mechanism to take an author who's been successful at one level to a higher level. I think that there's some good metaphors for that.

But I think the other thing is that obviously, author care – paying attention to, and supporting, and really bringing value to the marketing proposition for all your authors that you do sign – becomes a bigger part of the puzzle. Anyone can publish. It's the equivalent of pushing a button. But what they can't necessarily do is feel loved, supported, and marketed in a way that gets them the results that you both want.

KENNEALLY: Of course, the results you both want – publisher and author alike – is the sale of books, whatever form they take. But in the piece that you, again, spoke about from *PW* by Alex Palmer, the interviewed musician talked about the return of vinyl to the music business and the ritual that people had when they were listening to music back in the day – taking out the album, pulling it out of the sleeve, and kind of going through the whole process.

What about the book, itself, as object? In many a self-published author's scheme of things, they don't really think about having an object now. They simply want to make that book available on Amazon. Do you think the printed book ought to be as important to a self-published author as the digital?

O'LEARY: Well, I think that it should be as important to get their work read, but I don't think it should be important to have it done as an object. The key thing here is that for most self-published authors, they're not really in a financial position to create inventory of books.

At the very least, what they should do if they want to have a physical object is set up an arrangement with a print-on-demand publisher, so that when a book is ordered, it can be created and then delivered, so that you are able to at least support demand for both a physical, as well as a digital, copy of your work.

But I think more broadly, there's a question that we have to come to grips with of whether or not all books serve to be objects. A few years ago, I wrote a post essentially about Frank Chimero, an observer of the industry, talked about whether or not everything that was created had earned the privilege to be an object. That there are some works that are lasting, and should be preserved and collected. The digital format doesn't necessarily take away from that, but it gives us an opportunity to test those things that ultimately may earn the privilege to be objects.

The interesting thing about the example in the *PW* piece, and this was a quote from Scott Cohen, so if I could just read it. He said, "I think it's because it's a kind of ritual – pulling something off the wall, putting into a machine and playing the thing; there's a process. I think for reading too – a lot of this is going to come back to that ritual, to people doing things because it's an investment."



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I think what I tried to do in the piece was say, yes, it's true. There's a ritual of the book that I very much support. But it's not true for everybody. One of the perils, I said, is we have a ritual for the physical book – taking it off the shelf, opening it, reading it, turning the corner on a page to mark a passage that we particularly like.

The reality is that there are still many, many people who love the digital – the portability, the accessibility, the ease of selection, the breadth of selection that you get in your hand, and also just the opportunity to read a little bit at a time. That's something you don't get with a physical book, and I think that's a ritual in and of itself as well.

KENNEALLY: One of the rituals we have at *Beyond the Book* is to chat when we can with Brian O'Leary, who is the principal and founder of Magellan Media Partners here in New York City. Brian O'Leary, thank you so much for joining us today.

O'LEARY: My pleasure. Always good to see you, Chris.

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