

Beyond the Book

A Podcast Series on the Business of Writing and Publishing

**“Context first: A unified field theory of publishing”
Interview with Brian O’Leary, Magellan Media Partners**

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KENNEALLY: As print shifts to digital, the changing relationship between content and context is all. At least that’s the view of Brian O’Leary, principal of Magellan Media Partners who joins us at *Beyond the Book* today while we’re attending the Tools of Change Conference. Brian, welcome. Nice to see you again.

O’LEARY: Thanks, Chris. It’s really great to be talking to you again.

KENNEALLY: What we’re going to do is kind of reprise your keynote address yesterday afternoon, which was, I thought, extremely well-informed and really kind of drove right to the heart of the matter, which is what happens when the container goes away. Now, we want to be sure not to use too much jargon for our listeners, but that container or that form factor is the object we used to call the book, what print made possible. As we move from print to digital, something happens that you’ve identified. Tell us what that is.

O’LEARY: Sure, Chris. Well, when I talk about containers, I talk about the physical forms that we’ve used for centuries to transmit information, both books, magazines, newspapers, and it’s a convenient term from my perspective.

What I really wanted to talk about yesterday, and I think I was successful in doing that, was the damage done, from my perspective, by this container model of publishing. Specifically, we use the physical form of print, which limits the ability to apply context, as the primary source for digital content. And as the use of content, search for content, has migrated from physical to digital forms, we’re significantly worse off because we lack the context surrounding the content when we start with a physical form.

KENNEALLY: Let me try to unpack that for the listeners, and it seems to me important to sort of halt for a moment and say containers and form factors, they are going away if in not in many cases, have gone away with something like a Smashwords or Scribd and so forth, where it’s sort of digital first, born digital, as some people sometimes say.

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That still leaves us with a lingering legacy of thinking – a mindset, I think is how you’re looking at it – a mindset that print has given to us and bequeathed to people even in a world where digital is moving to the fore.

O’LEARY: True. Print has certainly not gone away. There are companies and vendors that you’ve just mentioned that are very active in essentially a born-digital or a digital-only opportunity. But still, something akin to 90 or 95 percent of the reading that’s done in the United States is done in print form for books.

I don’t think that that’s going to go away anytime soon, but what I am asking publishers to think about is reversing the content workflows that they have. Rather than start with the physical form, we’re going to fill pages within a book and then we’re going to figure out its digital use. Rather to start with what are essentially the markets that we want to reach and how can we best inform them, and then as we create content, to maintain the digital links to other information, not just title-level metadata, which is what we’re most familiar with, but it could be research, it could be links to other work, it could be internal links or unpublished material, etc., that would make content both more discoverable and richer.

KENNEALLY: Well, you talked to a pretty important audience yesterday afternoon here at Tools of Change of people in publishing who are thinking about these very questions, struggling with them, I would say. What’s the reaction when you tell people in publishing that this is how they need to go? Do they go, oh, yeah, Brian, we know that, or are they going, that’s easier said than done?

O’LEARY: That’s a really important question. One of the things that we conclude the presentation with is talking about – we talk about workflow, how people get content, both created, managed and then ultimately distributed, whether in physical or digital form. Change in workflow is awfully hard. It’s a big part of the practice that I have at Magellan.

KENNEALLY: Brian, you said that if strategy is the brain, then workflow is the heart. Carry that metaphor out and give us an idea of why this is going to be so difficult in publishing.

O’LEARY: Sure. Actually, changing workflow to me is the publishing equivalent of a heart transplant. It’s the circulatory system throughout the body. It’s how things get done. It’s embedded in culture. And one of the things that makes it hard to change how people work is that it really is what they’re about. So when you go to a publisher and you say, OK, I’d like you to shift your thinking from create the physical form and then derive a digital use to create content and then populate multiple physical and digital products from that content, you lose some of the train of thought with them.

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The speaker who followed me yesterday, Gus Balbontin from Lonely Planet, amplified that message by explaining that sometimes when he would talk to editors who would just say, well, we'll give that four pages. That's our natural way of thinking. But he says, well, there are no pages. What if there are no pages here? How much would you write? And the editor had to stop and say, I don't really know. Because we think in terms of the physical unit, the page count, the chapter of the book.

KENNEALLY: Right. And you referred to a myth from Indian lore of streams and rivers and water. That was an important idea, I thought, because the limitations of the container are sort of obvious in the sense we can carry our jug of water with us, but we can't carry the ocean. You're really talking about getting into the ocean and not just thinking about one single canteen or one single bottle.

O'LEARY: True. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, which is Salman Rushdie's book that I read from both near the beginning and at the end of the presentation, tells the story of the ocean and the streams, a story where in fact, all the stories that have ever been told as well as those that are yet to be invented, are maintained in fluid form and they can be both reused, recombined and combined with other stories to create yet other stories.

I think it's a really important metaphor. I'm not sure that I could capture what Salman Rushdie's intent was 20 years ago, but for me and I think for us now, it reflects where we stand in this digital age. Things are possible that we never imagined. Things are possible that we may not even completely understand yet, but the more digital and the more fluid we can be, the more our workflows can support multiple uses of our content.

I think that ultimately, we're going to open up a lot more reading and maybe some really interesting business opportunities.

KENNEALLY: At the risk of going dangerously out on a limb for a liberal arts major, I'm going to bring up some of the technical parts of this which you understand pretty well, and that is about the potential of XML, something you've spoken about in the past. Address that. What is XML enabling that's going to get us to this point where context is primary rather than content?

O'LEARY: XML – Extensible Markup Language – is kind of a root content structure and it can be customized by any publisher. There are some standards around it that people can implement. But the thing that really provides value in doing it is to essentially separate the content from the rendering or how it will appear.

You describe a heading or a chapter or a caption or a paragraph, and then you can apply styles to those as you see fit, which makes it very – and you can also take components of it

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– a chapter, a paragraph, a recipe – and recombine it with other content that may not have been in the original what we would have called a book.

That gives you the ability then to much more seamlessly create content for a physical object like a book, a database, a website, an e-book, a variety of other forms, as well as potentially over time, creating opportunities for readers to query the content and maybe combine some of what you do into something that's more useful for them.

KENNEALLY: How expensive is all of this going to be for publishers? They've got a lot going on right now. They've got to come up with iPad apps and social media programs and all the rest of this, and suddenly they're being told, you really have to throw away the idea of the book the object and think about the content. And that means addressing the question of XML, addressing other issues around various technical standards that may or may not be adopted throughout the industry. I guess my point is, how expensive is all of this and how much is this promising monetization down the road?

O'LEARY: I think the answer to the question is in part that it's not that expensive in terms of – I'm not encouraging people to go out and buy content systems or spend a lot on technology. XML is not a technology, it's an environmental approach.

But I think that publishers in general are in the business of linking content to markets. That's our work. That's our role. And this is an opportunity to take an entire organization, sit down at probably in some organizations, an awfully large table, but in many publishing cases, smaller tables, and have a conversation about what content do we have and what markets are we trying to serve, and then how do we organize that content in a way that increasingly becomes platform agnostic, that it's not print or digital, it's content and then markets, and the markets may be I want to be able to read this on a Kindle, I want to be able to read it in physical form, I want to be able to read it on my iPad.

That's the conversation. That conversation is hard because what you then begin to do is touch upon people's beliefs about how content and books should be created, and I think that does need to change.

KENNEALLY: And probably it needs to change not only for publishers, but for authors. Having committed the crime of writing a book or two myself, I'm thinking, well, if I were to propose a book today in 2011, I wouldn't be proposing a book per se. I would be proposing some kind of content and I would need to make a case that in each individual display of that content, it would have a value of a certain kind, right? So there would be perhaps the e-book flavor, the print flavor, maybe there's an enhanced book, maybe there's audio, all the rest of it. Even as an author, I ought to be addressing these questions.

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O'LEARY: I think that's very true. One of the things that I try to encourage publishers to think about is creating an ingestion function. This is essentially when an author gives content to a publisher, we need not make authors expert in XML, at least not at this point. Although much of what we do in blog posting, which many authors are now actively engaged in, is XML, in the application of style tags and the like.

But even if you create that simple thing, the thing I would encourage you as an accomplished author in a new era is to save your notes, to keep active records, to know your sources are valuable. Because ultimately, the enhanced book of the future will not always be this, but it could involve the rich history of what brought you to write the things that you wrote. And with that history, you then can create something of greater value for a cross-section of your audience.

KENNEALLY: In a way it's like the director's cut of a DVD.

O'LEARY: Hopefully more interesting.

KENNEALLY: It depends on the director, I suppose.

O'LEARY: That's very true, but I think the analogy is apt. I think the problem with giving any one example is that it encourages thinking but it also encourages people to sort of dismiss, sometimes. They say, well, that would not work for this kind of book.

There is no one answer, but I think that if we are stripping out or leaving on the cutting room floor – to extend your analogy – the rich context that makes content interesting in both recombinant as well as potentially illuminating, I think we're making a mistake that will cost us down the road.

KENNEALLY: Well, thank you as always, Brian O'Leary, principal of Magellan Media Partners, for encouraging us to think. That's something that we highly value at *Beyond the Book*. Thanks again for joining us.

O'LEARY: OK. I hope it's not too long before we do it again.

KENNEALLY: OK. Well, we'll look forward to it. For everyone at Copyright Clearance Center, this is Chris Kenneally wishing you a great day.

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