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Beyond the Book

A podcast series on the business of writing and publishing

Interview with Frances Pinter, Knowledge Unlatched

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KENNEALLY: Scholarly book publishers, like their siblings in the journal world, today face growing financial stress along with mounting demands by academic audiences for free or low-cost content. The search is on for sustainable business models that accommodate and address these challenges.

Hello, and welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm your host for Beyond the Book, Christopher Kenneally. A nonprofit startup in the U.K. is looking to create an international consortium of libraries that will pay the fixed cost for quality professional publishing services. Joining me from London is Frances Pinter, founder of Knowledge Unlatched. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Frances.

PINTER: Thank you. Welcome for having me.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. It's a pleasure to have you join us today, and we're looking forward to chatting with you about your startup company. We'll tell people by way of background that at age 23, Frances Pinter was the first woman to establish her own publishing company in the U.K. Pinter Publishers later became the leader in social sciences. In 2008, Bloomsbury Academic appointed Frances as its founding publisher, and she was the publisher most recently of the digitized Winston Churchill archive collection launched in 2012. Frances is also a visiting fellow at the London School of Economics and was consultant to Creative Commons.

Frances, a good place to start, I think, is to talk about this need that Knowledge Unlatched is meant to address around making access to knowledge ubiquitous. Tell us about that.

PINTER: There are lots of things that need to be changed in order to make knowledge ubiquitous, but now that we have digital at our disposal, we really have a responsibility to do so. Some people talk about the need to change copyright laws, but there's lots that we can do long before we do any of that.

Even within the existing framework, there's a great deal that we can do by changing business models in order to get to the point where academic publications are free to the end user.



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KENNEALLY: Right, and it's a fascinating little ecosystem. There's a variety of people involved here. The players include the authors, the publishers, and the libraries, and one of the things that you're trying to do with Knowledge Unlatched is find a way for them all to get closer to that goal of access to information and to knowledge, but without putting any particular player at risk. Tell us exactly how Knowledge Unlatched has been formed and what you're seeking to do.

PINTER: Initially, what I was looking at as an academic publisher myself and watching the print runs go down and the prices going up of monographs, I asked myself the question, where is the money that's paying for monographs now? And when I looked, I found that it's actually the libraries that are supporting the publication of monographs, because they're the ones that are buying these books.

So then I posed myself the question, well, how can we actually achieve more effective, efficient use of those funds in a way that also achieves open access? Since so much of what the cost incurred when these books are about is the selling of them one by one, unit by unit in this old-fashioned closed model that mirrors the old print world, we're actually constructing a very wasteful model. And if we go open access and if we find ways of funding the books earlier on in their development and in a different point in the value chain, then we might be able to have a true win-win-win situation for everybody – for readers, for authors, and for the publishers and libraries that serve the scholarly community.

KENNEALLY: Frances, we have a lot of people in our audience who are familiar, but very generally, with academic publishing, and you're referring specifically to monographs and perhaps at a greater extent to books as well. Can you define where a monograph fits into the publishing spectrum?

PINTER: Yes. The word monograph is a very awkward word because it actually means different things to different people and different parts of the world.

In the United States, a large number of people think of the monograph as the first book that an academic produces, usually out of their PhD. This is terribly important for their career, their promotion, but it may not be something that has very wide appeal even though it does contribute to the body of knowledge in that field. After all, that's what a PhD is supposed to do.

But for other people, monograph is simply the specialist findings or research communications in a book form, a long-form publication, as we're starting to call it in the digital realm. Certainly in Europe and in the U.K., the definition of a monograph is much broader, and many experienced scholars, senior scholars, particularly in the humanities, are producing these longer-length books that people call monograph but is certainly not their early works.



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So it's a hard-to-define word, very difficult to use, and I'm hoping that at some point it'll go out of our lexicon altogether.

KENNEALLY: And as you referred to, Frances, one of the challenges is around definitions in the digital space. The digital space evaporates the content vessel, if you will, the book as a form, and simply frees the content, the text, whatever else it is, to be what it wants to be.

PINTER: Absolutely, and that's why the concept of a long-form publication goes some way to dealing with this. We also talk about the enhanced e-book, although again, that's still resting on the concept of the book.

But in the humanities, in the social sciences, indeed in the sciences as well, we're moving into multimedia formats, and academics are sliding in between the various formats quite happily in what they're producing.

KENNEALLY: Right. We are talking with Frances Pinter, the founder of Knowledge Unlatched right now. Getting to understand better your model for Knowledge Unlatched, why create a library consortium and what would the library's role be in the publishing activity?

PINTER: We have to date a very well-developed and mature way of publishing and selling and holding in libraries books, and there are lots of players in that field who are all feeling very threatened and worried and also very excited about the new opportunities that we have. But what I was trying to do with the Knowledge Unlatched model is say, look, let's be disruptive in some areas but not in others. Let's try and make this shift to where the money is coming from and how it's being paid to the publishers for their publishing services. Let's try and make that as easy and painless as possible.

So publishers will still be doing those things that publishers do well and that the academic communities still want them to do, and that is to work on the quality of the production, ensure that the quality of the text is what it should be, and that libraries are able to also have choice in terms of what kind of premium models they may wish to buy above and beyond the basic model, which would go online for free on open access.

This model is meant to be adaptable as we move along and change the formats in our publications. So as I was saying earlier, when a larger part of the humanities goes what's called digital humanities and lots of different types of multimedia are produced, then Knowledge Unlatched can also be adapted to enable a core payment to be paid for the fixed cost and then optional buy-in for the enhanced versions.



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KENNEALLY: The libraries are already paying for content today. This is just paying at a different step in the process and in a different way, and possibly it might even end up costing less than it does today.

PINTER: Absolutely. And that's one of the incentives that we want to be able to offer to libraries, and the publishers seem to be very happy to work with this. If a library is making a contribution to the fixed cost, then when they buy a premium version should they wish to buy it, then they should be eligible for a discount that takes into account their contribution to the fixed cost.

But in order to make membership worthwhile, in order to deal with the free rider issue, we're giving the member libraries an additional discount. So, when they buy into the free and they buy the premium, the total will be less than any non-member would have to buy for a premium version.

KENNEALLY: Right. So, with regard to the publishers themselves, what is it about this particular model that they find attractive? They're going to have to change some of the ways that they interact with libraries themselves. They'll certainly have to start earlier in the process.

PINTER: Yes. For publishers who have long been worried about the monograph model, what this does is reduce the risk. I don't think it's a secret. We've all read about it and talked about it that most monographs actually lose money. And by having the fixed cost covered, the publisher will not lose money. The publisher will break even on preparing that fixed cost and putting it on open access.

But there is the unknown over whether or not the publisher will then sell more copies. It runs the same risk as the PDA model does – patron-driven acquisition – because if no patrons want the book, then nobody's going to buy it.

But for the scholarly community, it would ensure that the library budgets are able to sustain the publishing of those books that go through the publishing peer review and quality assurance steps that the academic community still wants to see.

KENNEALLY: Frances, how significant a change is this in the relationship between libraries and publishers? Even though it's a bit earlier in the process, has much changed at all?

PINTER: What we're trying to do is to minimize the changes that might stand as an obstacle in the way of libraries participating. In our discussions with libraries, they've told us that they want this to be pretty seamless. There are some libraries, of course, that want to order title by title. There are other libraries that just want to order whole collections of books, and we're going to make both of that possible.



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The difference is that they will be able to choose these books slightly earlier in the process because they will be receiving the same kind of information that they always have, but a little bit earlier. And we will be setting up a cycle whereby they will have to come back with their decisions whether to buy in or not buy in to particular books or packages by a certain deadline, but it'll be several months so they have enough time to make their choices.

And that information will be fed back to the publishers because of course that will impact on their pricing of the final book.

KENNEALLY: Right. You've been an academic publisher throughout most of your professional career, as you mentioned at the top, from a very early age, and you've also worked for George Soros and his Open Society Foundation, so in some sense, you've been a serial entrepreneur, and others have described you as a social entrepreneur. How are you bringing these two threads together at this moment?

PINTER: When I was working at the Open Society Foundation, we were dealing with a part of the world that was changing very fast, the post-Communist countries in the late '90s. One of the things that we did was set up EIFL, Electronic Information for Libraries, and that is a huge consortium. It's two and half thousand libraries across 50 countries. It was through that experience that I learned a great deal about libraries and library consortia, and I just love the way librarians are able to get together and really get things done. That informed part of the work that I'm doing with Knowledge Unlatched.

KENNEALLY: And one of the changes that you've been a part of is this movement in the library community from collecting to connecting. Tell us what you mean by that.

PINTER: The libraries are telling me that what they mean is they want to see themselves as serving their patrons in a much broader way than simply putting books on shelves or having the e-book collections available to them. It's through the services that they provide that they are concentrating on the connecting aspects, and this means of course consortial buying as one element, but it's also about sharing of tools and knowhow and I think that the goal, ultimately, is that any student anywhere, any researcher anywhere, should be able to access the whole of the world's academic content free at the point of use and beyond.

So, the open access element means that a student or people who aren't lucky enough to be either working for or studying at a university will also benefit from the content.

KENNEALLY: It's a remarkable vision, and certainly it must strike you as a dramatic change, something you couldn't have imagined when you began in publishing, that such a dream lies within grasp.



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PINTER: Certainly not. But I was already publishing books about the future of digital, oh, 30 years ago, with titles like *The Future With Microelectronics*, or *The Future of the Printed Word* was one of my favorite books. Actually, it is something that I and others have held now for quite some time and you now see some of this coming together with projects like Europeana and in America, the Digital Public Library of America and so on.

We're all working in our little sections trying to bring it all together, and of course, a lot of this rests on metadata. But equally, the funding and where and how the generation of new content takes place is absolutely critical, so we have the historic to deal with with lots of wonderful digitization projects, but it's funding the future that is something that Knowledge Unlatched is particularly concerned with.

KENNEALLY: We look forward to following where Knowledge Unlatched takes that particular dream in the coming months and years, and we appreciate your joining us today, Frances Pinter, founder of Knowledge Unlatched joining us from London. Thank you.

PINTER: Thank you.

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