



## Beyond the Book

A podcast series on the business of writing and publishing

### Interview with Steven Rosenbaum, author *Curation Nation*

For podcast release  
Monday, July 11, 2011

KENNEALLY: That roar you hear coming out of your laptop or smart phone is the tsunami of content washing over us endlessly in the digital age. Welcome to *Beyond the Book*. I'm Christopher Kenneally, host of Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series.

The deluge that overwhelms each of us every day in the form of waves of e-mail and news stories, text and video and sound, is an unmediated mess. Unless of course you and I or someone we assign the task can make sense of it all by organizing, prioritizing and synthesizing – in a word, the activity of curation.

To learn why in an era of data abundance the thing that is scarce is taste, I want to turn to Steve Rosenbaum, author of *Curation Nation*. Welcome to *Beyond the Book*, Steve.

ROSENBAUM: Thank you for having me.

KENNEALLY: It's a pleasure to have a chance to chat with you. Your book is just out from McGraw-Hill and it's drawn praise from a range of people from Arianna Huffington to Jeff Jarvis. No less than Guy Kawasaki – who's no slouch as an aphorist – said, "Curation, not creation, is king." So I have to ask you, what's the excitement about curation, which sounds like something you do to soften up and flavor a slab of beef.

ROSENBAUM: So if you go into the corner drugstore and you walk down the aisle and there's a whole wall of pain relievers and you don't have a headache, odds are you don't much care whether it's Advil or Tylenol or whatever. On the other hand, if you've got a throbbing, massive, pounding headache, that aisle and all the bottles that are on it make you very happy because you want that headache to go away.

KENNEALLY: It's the most important place in the world at that moment.

ROSENBAUM: Right. So curation is theoretically the cure to what ails us, which is this pounding headache of data that is really, even for those of us that are online most of



Copyright  
Clearance  
Center

## Beyond the Book

A podcast series on the business of writing and publishing

the time – which a lot of us now are – it’s getting worse and there’s no signs of it easing up.

**KENNEALLY:** Well, you give us some kind of prescription to carry on with that metaphor a bit on how to live in this new world of curation, this curation nation that you’re talking about. And I think the first question I want to ask you about is the effect on our online experience, how curation can give us that cure for what ails us. And so, if the content flood is as bad as we all think it is sitting at our desks all day long, one of the things that’s happening is the smothering of search, which for a moment in time, at least online, looked like the answer to our dilemma. But now you think that search is being smothered and I guess the question is, why should we care? Why should anybody but Google care about that?

**ROSENBAUM:** Search was an elegant solution when people went to the Web like it was a bookstore and went to take information off a shelf. But in the world that we increasingly live in, the Web comes to us. News happens. A friend, something happens in our world or in our business and we want that information to come to us as quickly and as focused and as narrowly as possible.

So search worked when most of the people putting data out to be searched were all in some way, shape or form authorized, right? If you look at the early days when everybody was building websites and building pages of data, these were companies or libraries or book publishers, but there wasn’t a lot of kind of random information being put on the Web in the early days when Google kind of cut its teeth on search.

The problem Google has – and I don’t envy them the problem – is that they look at everything as zeros and ones, and so your tweet or your check-in or a piece of information from the *New York Times* all appear to Google as kind of one and the same. That’s a recipe for disaster.

**KENNEALLY:** Well, to give us an idea of how curation can change all of that, can you give us an example of a curator, whether it’s an individual or an aggregator, that’s doing a particularly good job with all of this? Help us understand why.

**ROSENBAUM:** To begin with, I want to be clear about the fact that we’re at the very beginning of this new emerging human Web, and so all the tools that are out there and all of the curators that are out there are really kind of fumbling around in the dark. There’s nobody that’s set the gold standard for curation.

You could make the argument that in some ways, *Huffington Post* was a pretty good early model, because what Arianna figured out was that if she could aggregate traffic, which she did really well, that people that need content would come to her and that she could become the arbiter of what goes on the home page and what



Copyright  
Clearance  
Center

## Beyond the Book

A podcast series on the business of writing and publishing

images they choose and what things that they organize into what categories, and \$315 million proved she was right. Very successful early exit in the curation space.

But a better example or one that I think in some ways is interesting is the folks at TED. So, everything about TED is curated, right? Every person who wants to get on the TED stage goes through a vetting process. Everyone who wants to attend a TED or a TEDx goes through a vetting process. And it's constantly – as TED becomes bigger and bigger, the vetting process, in some ways, becomes more competitive because it's very valuable to have the TED community broad lane, not just the folks in Long Beach, California, at the annual TED conference but at any local TED, say, you know what? This idea can stand in front of the big red letters.

And so my company, Magnify, just – we haven't really publically announced it yet, but we are now powering TEDx, which is the TED local event operation. And the reason was because they wanted a video experience that felt curated. They wanted people that came to that site to feel like what they were getting was a thoughtfully organized, well-categorized, powerful taxonomy.

People don't want more information. They want less information properly organized so that you can help find what you're looking for.

**KENNEALLY:** But your point in the book, Steve, is that this needs to be a human process, that when we go to robotic aggregation, your really I think colorful phrase for it was you could taste the metal. When you see something that's been organized by some kind of robot online, it's not what you're expecting, what you want. You need the human element.

**ROSENBAUM:** So it's really as simple as this. The guy who I think in many ways figured this out earliest was Jeff Bezos at Amazon. If you look at Mechanical Turk and its history, what Bezos understood was there are certain things computers can't do. And the history of Mechanical Turk is about one out of every couple hundred thumbnails on a book jacket or a CD were wrong. The CD would be the Rolling Stones and the thumbnail would be Cat Stevens and there wasn't any way if the metadata was wrong in that thumbnail that a computer could look at the picture and look at the name and go, wait. Mismatch.

Humans do that instantly and so the original launch of Mechanical Turk was to say, I'm going to pay people a very small amount of money to read the title of a book or a piece of music and look at the image and go, oh, good. That's the proper image.

And so that ability to look at content selectively and creatively and say, you know, I'm going to build a site about Corvettes, but I don't care about repairing Corvettes or restoring Corvettes. I just want great, cool pictures of Southern California,



Copyright  
Clearance  
Center

## Beyond the Book

A podcast series on the business of writing and publishing

bright sunshine, beaches. Well, that's very different than the New Jersey Corvette community. And so all of a sudden –

Google would have you believe that if they just had more data, they could chop things up into the right boxes. But really what it comes down to is the job of a magazine editor or a book editor or a newspaper editor or a programmer at a television network is part science and part art, and the art part is the part that computers don't do very well.

KENNEALLY: It all sounds pretty wonderful. I'm thinking about that Corvette site in California. I'd take that one over the New Jersey one, but that's just me. But there is some criticism of all of this, and you cite one person in particular. We can talk about his perspective. But he sees curation as a term – what did he call it? – an NPR word for gatekeeper. And the person there is Andrew Keen who's famously a scourge of amateur content and he prefers professional reporting and really sort of authentic expertise.

Tell us about his argument and tell us what your defense is, why maybe Andrew Keen hasn't quite got it right.

ROSENBAUM: So I love Andrew Keen in the book. I'm really glad he's in there. He's a great foil. When I was at South by Southwest, he has this whole idea that professionals need to be paid and so we were theoretically going to be on a BBC radio show together and I was dying to ask him the question, how much are they paying you to be on this radio show, Andrew?

Because the truth of the matter is that professional content makers always have a sliding scale of what they charge. When I wrote the book, I was paid in advance. When I write for Huffington Post, I'm not paid anything. I don't see those two things as mutually exclusive and Andrew's thesis is that in a world of too much noise, amateurs simply gum up the works.

But I would argue, with all due respect to Mr. Keen, that he wants to be the one to define who a professional is. And in a world in which the tools are ubiquitous and we all have cell phones and we don't need a printing press for a newspaper or a transmitter, we're all going to make content and so what we're beginning to see is a Web in which everybody is a publisher and increasingly what I want to do is narrow the number of places that I go to listen to the world. I want to kind of dial down this fire hose of information and say, you know, as opposed to listening to the AP feed unvarnished, what I really want to do is listen to my NPR station in New York and CNN and one other professional news organization and maybe Twitter for a different kind of filter. But I don't necessarily want to be in a position where I'm drinking from the fire hose of data.



## Beyond the Book

A podcast series on the business of writing and publishing

KENNEALLY: Well, this is a point for a guy like me who's a First Amendment firster, where I'm really with you on this. On the one hand, I understand Andrew's point. I was a freelance writer myself for many years. I used to say I eat what I kill, and being paid is important. But in a world that's now this place where everyone can be a publisher, I want to celebrate that but I also want what you want, which is someone to kind of pick through all of it for me and help me understand what's important.

ROSENBAUM: One of the things I would say to my writer friends is, if you think the world's going to become harder to make a living as a writer, I would make the argument that it's always hard to make a living as a writer. And going back to the beginning of time and the Apple came along with desktop publishing and everyone thought, oh, printing is going to go the way of the dinosaur. Well, guess what? It didn't.

And the bigger thing – and this is maybe the thing that I think people are surprised by is when the content business took a tough hit in 2009 and newspaper business is still struggling, and so there's a tendency if you're a content maker or editor to see all of these technologies as encroaching on your livelihood. And in fact, I think it's the exact opposite.

It's not hard for me to write one blog post a week when I have some free time, but to be a daily newspaper columnist with a rhythm that says I have to write by deadline, very different. Very different skill set and you have to play hurt and you have to wake up sick and still write your column and all that stuff. I don't think professionals have anything to worry about amateurs coming in and eating their lunch.

KENNEALLY: It's nice to have a bit of optimism in the midst of all the gloom. We're on *Beyond the Book* right now chatting with Steve Rosenbaum, author of *Curation Nation*. He's also CEO and founder of Magnify.net, a video aggregation and curation engine.

Steve, I wanted to ask you about another common criticism of curation and aggregation. It's one that, not surprisingly, we hear a little bit about here at Copyright Clearance Center, and that is that this activity isn't merely collecting content, it's stealing it. In fact, you confess in the book to a point in your life, your boyhood, when you were something of a content crook. What was your crime then and why maybe is the notion that aggregation is theft is beginning to pay?

ROSENBAUM: First of all, I wrote that with my tongue firmly in my cheek. I hope that was entirely apparent.

KENNEALLY: Understood.



## Beyond the Book

A podcast series on the business of writing and publishing

ROSENBAUM: What I did was, I went around the neighborhood when I was a young kid and scooped up day-old newspapers and re-sold them to my neighbors. They may have been fifty cents new, but I figured they were worth at least a quarter a day later. They couldn't go from being 100 percent valuable to being zero just because someone set them out on the curb.

KENNEALLY: Well, Steve, I have to tell you, that's exactly the principle of Copyright Clearance Center. I'm not trying to plug the company here, but that's what we do. We provide licensing opportunities for the reuse of content, so whether it's the *New York Times* article or the piece from some scientific journal, there is, as you say, a value the day after it was published, and it may not be the full value at the moment it was born or printed. It's still got some value.

ROSENBAUM: I happen to believe that content has value and value is paid for in a number of different ways. One way is traffic. It's early enough days that we don't yet have a standard, but we're beginning to get a sense on the Web that linking to things or using a couple of sentences in a headline or maybe the first half of a paragraph – as long as at the end of the day, you're not picking up and moving the entire thought wholesale out of the place where it lives and where it has an economic life and onto your site so that you can steal the value.

It's pretty clear if you look at the Web, there are a lot of people trying to be fair. And there's a handful of folks who I would make the argument are probably nibbling at the edge of what's reasonable. The book talks about the guys at Newser who essentially say, if you don't like what we're doing, sue us. I'm not sure that being predatory toward content makers is a long term business strategy.

KENNEALLY: Clearly though, you feel much different from a guy like Mark Cuban, famous these days for something other than being a content provider, but he has been very strong in his condemnation of content curators. He's called them vampires. And I guess what you're suggesting is that those of us who do create content should begin to feel differently about the curators. We should maybe feel a little bit more of a kinship.

ROSENBAUM: I don't see those two roles as mutually exclusive at all. In fact, I think all creators should be curators as well – collectors, aggregators, organizers. And the way that I describe it to people is, we've all had that blog that we wrote and we sat down in front of the computer and we thought, oh, I haven't put anything on my blog in three days. I've got to write something. And we bang something out and we put it up there, so there we go.

But meanwhile, what people really want isn't just your words, but they also want your world view. So for example, Copyright Clearance Center. Every day, if you

search copyright on Twitter, there are hundreds of articles written about fair use and copyright and linking and sharing and various legal issues. I would love for you guys to be the place where I can go that says, every day, here's five things you need to read about this issue. One of them is written by one of our friends or colleagues and the other four are gathered from around the Web and linked to, and we're using not just our ability to put fingers on a keyboard, but also our ability to scan the world and say, you know what? This is the pertinent material in this conversation. That's the thing Google can't do. That's where the editorial people win.

**KENNEALLY:** And when it comes back to search, which it just did, one of the things that is changing too is that video is now increasingly a part of the online experience. You're a part of that. You've been in television for a long, long time, long before the Web. You were the creator of MTV UNfiltered. How is that ongoing shift from text to video impacting the experience of the Web? How does it change curation? The number one search engine is Google, but the number two search engine is YouTube.

**ROSENBAUM:** Video is exponentially harder for an algorithm to be able to tell you a good one from a bad one, and there's been – for as long as I can remember, the holy grail is we're going to get software to be able to transcribe voice into text and you'll be able to search on keywords. But what we know is, guess what? That doesn't really tell you what you want to know, and I'll give you an example.

About three weeks ago, I was at the Beacon Theatre in New York City and on stage was Elvis Costello. Amazing concert. And I look around me and there are maybe a hundred people with their cell phones recording video. So I got back to my house that night and just for fun I built a Magnify channel real quick and I searched Beacon Theatre Elvis Costello 2011 and bing, bing, bing, bing, up comes 60 or 70 videos. They'd been posted all over the Web.

Of those 60 or 70, there were about 10 that were really good. The audio was good, the picture was good, so I knit together those 10 or 12 videos into my experience of the concert. Am I stealing the music from Elvis Costello? Pretty clear to me that nobody's going to use that material. If they want his music, they're going to buy a CD or buy the tracks.

**KENNEALLY:** Right. It's not a substitute for the original music.

**ROSENBAUM:** And it's interesting because it wasn't but a year ago if you'd have gone to that concert, there would have been a big sign out front saying, no videotaping, and there would have been an announcement at the beginning. But clearly, artists are beginning to figure out that the ground has shifted enough that sharing and kind



## Beyond the Book

A podcast series on the business of writing and publishing

of using the Web to be a broadcast tool to get your music out there or your material, is –

And another terrific example would be this program that you and I are doing. I'm sharing a lot of the ideas of my book with you in this program, but I'm presuming that some number of your listeners are going to go, you know, I should go buy that. As opposed to, oh, I got everything he's got to say. Great. I just saved myself 14 bucks, I don't have to buy the book.

KENNEALLY: Well, we will definitely help people find the book and hopefully, they will buy it. We encourage that kind of activity. As an author myself, I want to see authors rewarded for their hard work. And we want to thank you, Steve Rosenbaum, author of the new book from McGraw-Hill Companies called *Curation Nation*. Steve has been chatting with us from New York where he is the CEO of Magnify.net. Steve, thanks so much for joining us on *Beyond the Book*.

ROSENBAUM: Chris, it's my pleasure.

KENNEALLY: I want to tell you too that *Beyond the Book* is produced by Copyright Clearance Center, a global rights broker for the world's most sought-after materials including millions of books and e-books, journals, newspapers and magazines. You can follow *Beyond the Book* on Twitter, like *Beyond the Book* on Facebook and subscribe to the free podcast series on iTunes or at our website, [copyright.com/beyondthebook](http://copyright.com/beyondthebook).

Our engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. My name is Christopher Kenneally. For all of us at Copyright Clearance Center, thanks for listening to *Beyond the Book*.

END OF PODCAST