Copyright Clearance Center Beyond the Book
A podcast series on the business of writing and publishing

Interview with Rafael Sidi, Elsevier

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KENNEALLY: The world is changing. No, we're not talking about global warming, but about the ecosystem that is emerging in publishing around applications. And joining us today on *Beyond the Book* to speak about this new app ecosystem is Rafael Sidi, vice president, application marketplace and developer network, academic and government markets at Elsevier in New York. Rafael, welcome to *Beyond the Book.*

SIDI: Thank you for having me, Chris.

KENNEALLY: It's a pleasure to have you join us here today, and I'm coming to you because I was excited by a presentation you gave at NFAIS earlier this year, and you used this expression, the app ecosystem. Can you tell our listeners at *Beyond the Book* what you mean by that?

SIDI: Sure. As a scientific publishing company, we are going, moving to a solution space and we don't want to be just an information provider, but we want to also provide solutions to our customers, to our market. And then, we are providing the solutions. What we want to do, we don't want to just build the solutions ourselves, but we want to go to the community, collaborate with the community and build the solutions together with the community.

And the ecosystem that we are talking is we are going to build the solutions, which we are calling applications, together with the community and everyone who we are serving can go to this ecosystem, can find the applications, the solutions, that they are going to use to improve their search and discovery process.

KENNEALLY: So who are the participants then? There would be authors, there would be librarians. Talk about how they can play a role and who else may be involved.

SIDI: That's a good question, because we're always thinking that when we create a developer network, your audience is going to be developers. But in our case, being an STM, our developers are authors, the authors who are publishing with us, librarians – they have great ideas. They have some technology background. They can build applications and solutions – and students who are building applications.

Indeed, recently, we had Ed Hackett at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and we had close to 40 PhDs who are building applications for our application marketplace. So

the end user, the pupils who are going to build applications are authors, librarians, developers and also startup companies and large companies, too. Anyone who can create a solution that is going to really improve the efficiency, that is going to improve the search and discovery process for research and scientists are our market.

KENNEALLY: Well, for our audience, some of whom may understand what you mean, and for someone like me who's making sure he understands – the job of the journalist – let me ask you a question about the role of data in all of this. A publisher in the past was a provider of information, but not raw information. Information that was – if you will – cooked, rather than raw. Today, you've got a combination of raw and cooked and you're offering it as ingredients, to continue the analogy, to these participants, to the authors, to the librarians. Have I got that right?

SIDI: Yes. I'm smiling because yesterday, just there was something that I saw that they are talking about comparing data information to what your food analogy, and they are saying that you can create a cake, you can present that cake in a nice way and then the knowledge is the empty plate.

So what we are trying to do with the data, we want to give access to our data as we've been giving, to make that data easily remixable, reusable among the developers. And wanting that, I've been saying that if we let the data to be used by the scientists, by the researchers within our environment, they are going to be able to create much, much better solutions. They are going to be able to create solutions that we couldn't have imagined.

So what we are doing is just we are going to the crowd. We are letting them play with our data and build on top of our data stuff that they need to build, because at the end, scientists and researchers, they know their problem better than us, in some cases, and what we are doing, we are giving them the tools and we are providing the services for them in this application and developer network in our framework so that they can build using our services and tools.

KENNEALLY: Well, in the presentation I saw in Philadelphia, you spoke about the social responsibility about doing this, having the opportunity for people to participate in this ecosystem, to contribute. Tell us more about what you mean by that.

SIDI: Sure. When we started this initiative as Elsevier, we had one of the raison d'etres of this initiative is to accelerate science. We are here because we strongly believe that we want accelerate science. And what we said is that we want to open up our platform to accelerate science.

And the social responsibility comes – at the end, we want to create a better world for this. What we are doing is really – the stuff that we are doing is we want with the publications, with the solutions, we want to create a better world, and that's the social responsibility element.

So we want also the scientists, the developers, to help to create solutions that's going to improve the search and discovery so that someone is going to find the insides, the gems, between our data they couldn't find any other way.

KENNEALLY: And of course with more information accumulating every second, that becomes a more difficult task.

SIDI: Correct. And that's why we are going to the community. We are saying that, hey, let's work together with this. Let's create the solutions together. Because in the community, you see excellent examples of text mining applications, and what we want to do with this initiative in this ecosystem, we want to take those text mining applications and we want to give our content, our APIs, to those PhDs to use our content, to port their application to our solutions so we can expose that application that maybe no one knows that they built. The application is sitting in their hard drive. So we can expose to all our scientists and researchers who are using our science edit platform, scopes (sp?) platform, so we can help them in sharing their talent and sharing their knowledge with the other scientific community.

KENNEALLY: Well, sharing the knowledge may help the scientific community. It may even help human beings at large. How does it help Elsevier?

SIDI: Again, for us, I think When we started this initiative as Elsevier, we had one of the raison d'etres of this initiative is to accelerate science. We are here because we strongly believe that we want accelerate science. And what we said is that we want to open up our platform to accelerate science.

KENNEALLY: You describe the situation as being rather like a gold rush. Gold rushes are good for people who make shovels and work clothes as well as for the people who actually end up finding the gold. Is Elsevier in the position then of making the shovels and the work clothes? You're sort of – you're there providing the means by which people can discover the information.

SIDI: Again, what we want to do, we want to provide the tools and the services so that our communities – scientific community, research community – can build these applications. So we want to help them, we want to collaborate them and we are just providing the tools.

And we are here, again, to accelerate science. But there is a key element that we want to continue collaborating with the scientific community, with our authors, with our librarians as we have done in the past when we continue. When we publish journals, we collaborate. Now, we are taking that to another level, not just in the journal publication area we are collaborating with the scientific community. Now we are creating another service to the scientific community to design applications.

And what we are saying, that we can also develop together workflow solutions so we can collaborate on the application sides, not just on the journal sides.

KENNEALLY: This is all still very new indeed. Is there an example of a success that you can point to or a university setting that's already begun to take advantage of all of this?

SIDI: Again, what we've seen is specifically, we created an application for (inaudible), which we call (inaudible) applications, so you can download any article that we have in EPUB or Mobipocket format, and that's a workflow solution that we created for the on-the-go user researcher, our users, so they can download anything and they can read it from their mobile devices. So that's a workflow application that's being top downloaded, (inaudible) top subscribed application. And we got tremendous feedback from our customers on that.

And another good application that we have where we want to expose also library catalogues – it was developed by the University of Illinois by a librarian, Bill Michel, an application that lets search library catalogues. So what we are offering to our librarians is that if you have your library catalogue, we can search your library catalogue within our platform.

So we have some applications that have been very well-received, like table download applications, so you can take an HTML tables and download to your Excels. So the real workflow applications that we are building is getting very good feedback.

And what we've seen, some librarians are taking these applications and making the applications as the default applications in their universities, so that they want to provide it to all their students and customers.

KENNEALLY: What's important in this is the communication between the various players and being able to work with the crowd or the community or the other participants in the ecosystem. Have you been able to respond to a specific request yet for something that you hadn't thought of but they did?

SIDI: Good question. What we are trying to do right now is to reach out to the community, to the crowd. We've been doing different challenges. I mentioned we had a challenge at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Our first one was at New Jersey Institute of Technology. And what we are doing right now, currently we have two different challenges going on.

One, we call it Apps for Science. It's a challenge among six countries where we are asking developers to submit applications and then we are giving them prizes. And the other challenge that we are doing among our librarians, Apps for Library. So we are asking to librarians to submit ideas. And we are going to – again, a judging committee is going to pick the ideas and then what we are planning to do, some of the ideas we are going to go to our developer network and develop, and those ideas are going to be developed by the developer network.

So, so far, we've seen an excellent biomedical image search application that is going to be built by the University of Madison, Wisconsin. So we are getting some ideas that we haven't thought about it.

Just recently, we launched a new app from a company called iSpeech and the app takes the text and then translates to words, so you can just hear the text. And that's also very important for us in terms of accessibility to the content, making the content easily accessible to everyone. So I if I have an impairment, then I can listen to the text.

KENNEALLY: Well, it sounds like a tremendous opportunity to really kind of create your own incubator system. If you go out to Silicon Valley, incubation of startups is critical to the next wave of innovation. In a fashion, you're putting together a space where you will be incubating future customers, future services, future products.

SIDI: Again, you are just on the point. That's one of the aims that we want to do. Eventually, we want to create an incubation environment for the scientific and research community. So sometimes, what we are doing, we are also providing some seed funding to startup companies or startup projects if they need some hardware, so we look into the concept and then we provide some seed funding.

And recently, we are collaborating with Drexel University and National Science Foundation. They have a project that we might be contributing to that project, provide seed funding. There is like some kind of incubation environment there, so we can be part of any commission environment.

But our goal for the future, definitely, we want to create an Elsevier incubation environment so we can fund in the future – this is long-term vision – we can fund

startup companies who are going to build really workflow solutions for researchers and scientists.

KENNEALLY: Well, thank you very much, Rafael Sidi for helping us understand better what the app ecosystem is looking like today in 2011 and what it may look like in the future.

We have been chatting with Rafael Sidi, vice president, application marketplace and developer network, academic and government markets at Elsevier in New York. Rafael, thank you very much for joining us on *Beyond the Book*.

SIDI: Thank you, Chris, for having me.

KENNEALLY: And for all of us at Copyright Clearance Center, this is Christopher Kenneally wishing you a great day.

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