Interview with
Brian O'Leary, Executive Director
Book Industry Study Group

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KENNEALLY: A two-year research project funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council reported in 2017 on the ominous health of academic book publishing. As the number of titles sold rose by nearly half, from 43,000 to 63,000 between 2005 and 2014, unit sales in the same period for academic books fell 13%, from 4.34 million copies to 3.76 million annually, a drop of nearly 600,000. According to a report in the Times of London Higher Education Supplement, that drop meant average sales per title fell from 100 to 60 books. Yet any effort to save scholarly monograph publishing will rely on usage data that remains hard to come by.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book.

Online access, competing digital formats, and open access publishing models have all contributed to the sales crash of print editions of academic monographs. Publishers, researchers, universities, and funders, however, aren't ready yet to give up on a favorite form. With a grant from the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the Book Industry Study Group and several other collaborators in the US and the UK recently undertook a review of factors holding back adoption of ebook monographs. The conclusion – granular and comparable data on users and usage of such works is needed to justify not only publishing programs, but also research activities. BISG executive director Brian O'Leary joins from New York to share the research findings. Welcome back to Beyond the Book, Brian.

O'LEARY: It's always good to be here, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Well, we're looking forward to speaking with you about this topic. It's a special area of the book industry, one that is important to our culture as much as it is important to our bookshelves – and that is, of course, academic publishing, particularly monographs. This work that you undertook comes in the face of those rather ominous numbers regarding print editions of monographs, and there's an effort underway to push this particular piece of publishing into the digital world and ebook formats.

I guess one place to start is the notion of open access – these are open access, OA, ebooks in particular that we are speaking about. OA is something that we usually associate with journal publishing. Tell us a bit of background regarding OA and books.

O'LEARY: Well, there has been a longer history of open access publishing in the journal space. Open access monographs in the scholarly space are relatively new, in the last, I'd say, six to eight years. Probably a few examples have preceded it, but a real trend. But the motivation in similar. In many cases, research – or the kinds of research that's been done – has been funded by multiple sources, including some in the public domain. As well, the folks who do fund scholarly research, and it's very often supported in one way or another by an institution, wants to find as wide an audience as possible, and they don't want to have the barrier to entry of sometimes the $75-$125 book prevent people from getting access to the work itself. Open access itself is not the leading cause and certainly not the only cause of the challenges in scholarly publishing, but we wanted to make sure that if it's being done, and it is being done, that we do it in as good a fashion as we could.

KENNEALLY: And there are many reasons for a variety of stakeholders to want to have the information that justifies this kind of activity. As you say, the funders want to know that the research they've paid for is making a difference. The publishers want to know that the books are reaching the right kinds of people. And of course, the authors themselves care with regard to their own reputations. So this is a critical moment for OA monographs. The issue comes down to collecting this data – this usage data that's going to demonstrate a return on investment for all those particular parties. What are the challenges? How difficult is it to gather this kind of data right now?

O'LEARY: Well, gathering it is relatively straightforward, though not always, because a mixture of both commercial and non-commercial or not-for-profit entities collect and report on information. So you have an EBSCO or ProQuest collecting information about downloads and usage in a for-profit domain, but you also have Knowledge Unlatched, COUNTER, JSTOR, etc. also collecting this information and sharing it. But the challenge is in part that they're different methodologies, so the information needs to be in some way normalized, as well that not everybody's collecting information on every book, so there are gaps in the information. And finding a way to bring people together to figure out how to do it better was part of the goal of the project that we were part of.

KENNEALLY: And this is, again, a difference between scholarly journals and scholarly books. In the scholarly journal publishing world, that kind of like-to-like

information is easier to come by, I understand. So it's really a particular problem for OA books. Is that right?

O'LEARY: That's correct. I have a long history a long time ago on weekly publications in the for-profit sector, and I can tell you from personal experience that everything is easier when there's periodicity. You get to work things out on a regular basis. Even if a journal's quarterly, that's materially different from a monograph which is generally once. There are some times there are monographs that are published in a series, but that's more the exception than the rule. So it's hard to find – when there's a variety of different one-off approaches to creating open access monographs, it's harder to find commonality.

KENNEALLY: And the kind of granular, comparable information that would be ideal to have is what, exactly? And how would it inform publishing decisions, research funding decisions, all the other decisions that get made along this publishing workflow chain?

O'LEARY: Well, what we found in the project that we were doing was that there was no mechanism to convene or bring together all the information that might reasonably describe what's going on. Sales data in a for-profit sense is readily understood, and it's one of the measures of success for a book that is published on a for-profit model. In open access, there's a panoply. It could be downloads. It could be engagement. It could be social media mentions. I think we counted 18 different potential measures. In that regard, there are different entities picking up some of that data, but no one was picking up all of it. So one of our primary recommendations was to create a data trust that would better define governance and architecture for the overall collection and maintenance of the data that would determine open access ebook use.

KENNEALLY: And some of the things that you're looking to target with this information gathering include benchmarking, mapping communities. Tell us more about that.

O'LEARY: So one of the things that we've tried to do is figure out what information we reasonably want to collect. The second is who is actually collecting it, and what kinds of relationships do we need to build so that we can get access to in a more or less automated way – a lot of the data collection right now is being done manually for a given title. So we have to figure out a way to work with a for-profit entity like EBSCO or a not-for-profit entity like COUNTER and figure out how to get the information that they have, bring it into a central database, and then assign it or collate it for a given monograph.

That gives us the ability to do three things. The first is streamline and do things that an individual publisher or an individual author couldn't possibly do on their own with a great deal of scalability. The second is it gives us the ability to report back on a regular basis the norms – you know, what is the average? What is the outlier? How often does a book break through in social media? So that kind of informs the community more generally. And then it allows us to scale individual titles within that so that you can see that this is a high-performing title on engagement, or this is a book that did particularly poorly in this area, but quite well in others, and what did we learn from that?

KENNEALLY: And the approach comes down to trying to develop a community as well as developing the sort of systems that can process this information. Talk about that importance of community here, particularly as it relates to establishing what I think you call in this white paper from the BISG, Exploring Open Access Ebook Usage – you call it a data trust.

O'LEARY: Sure. Well, it is purely community-based. A data trust has a variety of different components, and it's quite often used in areas where multiple parties are contributing to a specific – in this case, dataset. They all have a stake in it, and they all want to make sure that the information is used in a coherent way.

The thing that is important is essentially engagement around the issues of trust between the stakeholders, meaning the for-profit and nonprofit entities as well as the publishers. You also want to develop some shared technical standards. That doesn't occur in a vacuum. That also has to be done in community. And then you want to have clear requirements for validation in data and information so that the system can't be gamed, or that if it is gamed, it shows up in the input and ingestion process.

We see this as a classic collective action problem. To solve that, it requires the development of some sort of a trusted framework for coordinating among all of the relevant stakeholders that you've mentioned and then ultimately to create a model that drives successful collaboration.

KENNEALLY: So in this white paper which you coauthored, Brian, Exploring Open Access Ebook Usage, you make half a dozen very specific recommendations. Listeners can download that report from the Book Industry Study Group website that can look at those recommendations in detail. But tell us – what next? You've made the recommendations. How can you try to put some of this into force?

O'LEARY: Sure. Well, my coauthor on this is Kevin Hawkins of the University of North Texas. He is leading an effort to solicit funding to do the six things

recommended in the white paper. These specifically are creating the governance and architecture pieces for the data trust and then articulating priorities for things it does. And then we anticipate creating a pilot service that implements both the governance model as well as the recommendations.

The good news is that there are relevant open source technologies already built, in Europe in particular, and we anticipate picking those up and adapting them for use across the base of stakeholders in the United States. We'd do that in a variety of different ways, but part of it is developing use cases for who would benefit and how they could contribute to a data trust. And we think ultimately that'll give us a base to extend across not just the US or the North American market for open access monographs, but across the globe, because there are a variety of different models for open access depending on whether you go to Europe, Asia, Africa, some of them just emergent. And we want to make sure that what we do is relevant broadly.

KENNEALLY: And I want to underscore that global point, Brian O'Leary, because so much of publishing is focused in North America and in Europe, but your report really does emphasize this community that is a worldwide community that you want to involve.

O'LEARY: Agreed. And part of that is aspiration and part of it is necessity. Europe is actually further ahead on open access than is North America. The US is somewhat later to pick it up. There's no problem – and in fact, there's a lot of virtue – in building on the good work that they've done particularly through efforts like HIRMEOS and the OPERAS framework, which is the open access initiatives in the EU. We anticipate doing more of that, and it'll help us shortcut what we have to do in the United States and hopefully amplify the good work that's been done there.

KENNEALLY: We have been speaking today with Brian O'Leary, executive director of the Book Industry Study Group. He is coauthor with Kevin Hawkins from the University of North Texas of a new white paper, Exploring Open Access Ebook Usage. We will link to where you can download the report, and we want to thank Brian O'Leary for joining us today on Beyond the Book.

O'LEARY: Thank you, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Beyond the Book is produced by Copyright Clearance Center. Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. Subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts and follow us on Twitter and Facebook. The complete Beyond the Book podcast archive is available at

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