



## **Interview with Alex Lazinica**

**For podcast release  
Monday, May 25, 2020**

**KENNEALLY:** Scientific advances can happen anywhere, of course. Most often, though, the incremental discoveries that add to human knowledge about the world occur in the laboratory and the library. Later, sometimes much later, the findings are shared in journals and other publications. But is that really the whole story?

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. Journals dominate scientific communications, but they are only one element in a multilayered information-sharing network. Conferences are an especially timely source of breaking news developments in every field.

A former robotics scientist and founder of IntechOpen, the world's largest open access publisher, Alex Lazinica saw the need for a comprehensive, authoritative online platform to collect scientific lectures, research discussions, and livestreaming conferences. Two years ago, he founded Underline.io as such a repository, and two months ago, when the coronavirus pandemic struck, Lazinica was ready for organizers and presenters who were forced to shift to a virtual conference experience. Alex Lazinica joins me now from Croatia. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Alex.

**LAZINICA:** Thanks, Chris. Thanks for inviting me. Thanks for such a nice introduction.

**KENNEALLY:** Well, we are very happy you can join us. It's another way that the world is responding to the coronavirus crisis. You began your professional career, as I mentioned briefly, as a robotics researcher. You studied across Europe and eventually co-founded the *International Journal of Advanced Robotic Systems*, which was the first open access journal in the field. Then you later established IntechOpen, and your focus there was on addressing the needs for academics to share research in book-length form. What led you to your latest entrepreneurial effort at Underline?

**LAZINICA:** Well, as you said, I'm a former robotics and artificial intelligence scientist. In fact, I'd been working for some six years or so at the Vienna University of Technology in Austria and spent some time at the famous EPFL Institute in



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Lausanne, Switzerland. During my research work, I was traveling to find the literature which I needed for my exploration, for my learning process. And we founded, as you said, the *International Journal of Advanced Robotic Systems* in order to offer an open access robotics platform for our fellow colleagues. Actually, that was the first open access robotics journal indexed in Web of Science in the world. Then when we launched our first open access books, it was a huge success, and then things started to move so fast. They were fast-scaling.

At one point, I decided to leave academia and try to be an entrepreneur. That was kind of 15 years ago. Today, IntechOpen is the world's largest publisher of open-access books, with work of more than 100,000 scientists. We've published even a few Nobel Prize winners. And we have offices and activities around the globe.

As you said correctly, one or however – two years ago, I had started to develop a new project, new platform, which is called Underline Science. And the way I noticed a huge gap in scholarly communications process – there is no repository for all scientific lectures being held at conferences around the globe. As we all know and appreciate, the conferences are – they play an important aspect in the scholarly communication process. They're such a valuable format. But everything is one-and-done. After the event ends, everybody just forgets what happened the last few days, and they're all focused on the next year's event. Underline wants to change that. And for that reason, we built the Underline platform, which is the world's first repository platform custom-made for scientific conferences, lectures, and discussions, and livestreaming technology as well.

**KENNEALLY:** And the COVID-19 crisis, Alex, and the resulting lockdowns around the world – of course, it's brought the conference industry to a sudden halt, and it will probably be some time before physical conferences are able to resume. So how is Underline supporting this digital shift?

**LAZINICA:** Well, the whole pandemic situation, I would say, brought the spotlight on the Underline platform, since we have been working and developing this product and technology for the last two years, and we are kind of prepared with the technology, with the support, and with the expertise of my team. So Underline is helping societies and individual organizers in planning, hosting, and broadcasting the online virtual events. So we are supporting the organizers, and in a way, we are working as a part of their team. We are not just the software which provides a username and password for login, but we are collaborating with the organizers on a weekly or daily basis, supporting the speakers, helping in production of the best online event possible. We are building the scripts of each of the livestreaming days. We have a professional TV studio with a host who is moderating the event and interacting with the speakers, panels, and audience during the livestreaming.



Of course, obviously, our lectures can be prerecorded as well. It all depends on the conference organizer and on the size of the event as well. We have technology for both, or we can have a mix of both. For example, right now, we are hosting the AAMAS 2020 event, which is a famous conference in the artificial intelligence discipline with more than 1,000 posters, three days livestreaming, and more than 400 prerecorded lectures. And it's happening right now today. It started yesterday, and it ends tomorrow.

**KENNEALLY:** We are all learning a great deal about what it takes to run a successful virtual program. It is not as easy as simply pouring the content from the physical container – from the conference space or the hotel – into the digital space. There's a great deal more involved and many points that are important to consider. I wonder if you've given some thought to some of these.

For example, one of the most important parts of conferences are the question-and-answer sessions where speakers and the audience get to interact. How do you achieve that same level of interactivity in the virtual space?

**LAZINICA:** I would say it takes a lot of preparation and going into details. We all need to know what will happen when. In a way, it's like organizing a professional TV production event. People kind of are not aware of that. So in order to have the best virtual event possible, you need really to go into the details, have a professional team. For example, one of the members of our team has big experience in organizing huge TV shows like Big Brother. Then we have Mia (sp?). Mia is our head of production. She is a four-time Emmy award winner. You need to have a team who is experienced in TV production and then the great online digital technology which supports that.

To answer your question on community engagement, I would say – so we are building so-called coffee break sessions where people can hang out, can mingle to talk with each other in informal settings and meet new colleagues or touch base with the ones they already know. We have Q&A sessions, poll questions, chat functions, and we are building the new features on a weekly basis.

**KENNEALLY:** One of the real challenges, of course, is getting everybody into the same timeframe. You do that when you have a physical conference, because everyone travels to the location – Paris, New York, London, Boston, wherever it could be. But when they are scattered digitally, they're in all sorts of different time zones. Is that a particularly difficult challenge?



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LAZINICA: Yeah, that's a really good point and a good question. At the end, somebody will always suffer. (laughter) Somebody needs to stay awake or wake up early. London time zone is kind of the middle, so we manage the activities around that. That's the one thing. The other thing – we need to check what's the audience geography and size and try to adapt on that, even though we all know scientific events are global events. But what's important, I would say, and our experience shows that it's better to have more days of the livestreaming but with less hours per day – not just in regards to the time zones, but as well it's hard to have the attention of the people for more than a few hours per day on a computer screen.

KENNEALLY: The important aspect of what you're doing at Underline isn't simply being the platform for the programs as they roll out in real time, but what happens to them after the conference ends. You said that in the past, in the physical space, that was it. It was sort of one-and-done. And now with Underline, there's a way to organize and archive all the presentations. How do you do that? It requires, I'm sure, working with the metadata of all these various files and doing things to organize the materials so that they can be searched and shared.

LAZINICA: Yes, thanks for this question. That's exactly Underline's mission. Underline's vision and mission is to broadcast scientific information and make it globally accessible and useful. By accessible, we mean that we are the platform where the lectures are hosted, broadcasted, preserved, archived. And by useful, we like to say we are enriching the lectures. So after the conference ends, all the lectures are enriched. We are building the transcriptions, the translations to the world major languages. We are building the abstracts, further reading links – so those are the links to external journal articles or books which are in relation to the lecture topic. We are building the speaker profile, so each speaker has its own profile with a short biography. You can connect with those people, start any kind of potential collaboration.

Each lecture gets a DOI number. That's really important, I would say, because then the conference lecture can be properly cited and referenced. We want to bring the lectures being presented at the scientific conferences into the scholarly communication process, and that's important. We are here to preserve that content. Otherwise, it will be lost, as it is lost now. It's too valuable to be lost, and we want to change that.

KENNEALLY: Well, Alex, as a final question, it is often the case that our experiences in the personal space as far as digital goes shape the ones we have in the professional space. I'm thinking of what you're working on at Underline as a kind of Netflix for scientific presentations. And in the Netflix space, of course, you'll get a suggestion – if you like this movie, maybe you'll like this one. Are you going



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to be offering recommendations, so that if you like this lecture by Alex, maybe you'll want to watch this presentation by Chris?

LAZINICA: Yes, of course. We already have that feature. So we recommend the lectures – those can be the next lectures from the same event, or there can be similar lectures on a similar or same topic. We are kind of following the activities of your fellow colleagues. We have the search engine, so the whole platform is searchable. And as I said, we are developing the new features on a weekly basis.

KENNEALLY: Alex Lazinica, founder and CEO of Underline, thank you so much for joining me today.

LAZINICA: Thank you, Chris. It was nice spending the time with you.

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 [beyondthebook.com](http://beyondthebook.com). I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening and join us again soon on CCC's Beyond the Book.

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