



Seeking Information Balance 2020 Year-in-review

Special guests

- **Anita Makri, Journalist/Filmmaker**
- **Toby Green, Coherent Digital**
- **Bodour Al Qasimi, PublisHer**

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KENNEALLY: Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally.

In the final weeks of the year, this program is looking back at the past twelve months.

Ours is the Information Age. In other epochs, humans fashioned their most important tools from stone, iron and bronze. Today, we build with information.

Information, though, is neither solid rock nor unyielding metal. The elements of its composition are accuracy and evidence-based reporting.

In this third episode of a three-part review for 2020, three takes on information illuminate the golden rule that sources matter – and the more, the better.

1.

The spread of the coronavirus across the world is viral, in the usual medical sense of the term. A parallel pandemic has simultaneously erupted, too: A virtual, viral infodemic of misinformation.

Anita Makri writes from London on science and global development, and has covered previous health emergencies, including the 2014 Ebola epidemic in west Africa. She says that lessons learned from that crisis can help to dispel the rumors and myths about COVID-19. To battle misinformation successfully, says Makri, we must try to understand it.

KENNEALLY: What you're really asking us all to do, and it's not easy, is to understand the people who are expressing these concerns, these anxieties, which you're suggesting are really legitimate. And we need to appreciate them and understand where they are coming from.



MAKRI: Yes, that's a point of view that actually came to the fore in 2014 more strongly, and that goes back to the spread of Ebola in west Africa. That was a time when a particularly sort of scary and deadly disease was spreading, and public health professionals were having quite a lot of trouble persuading local people to take some of the precautions that were being recommended.

Initially, that was framed as a sort of resistance by the part of local people, perhaps because they weren't comprehending the instructions. But eventually, with help from social scientists, it became clear that there were actually historical and day-to-day concerns that were underpinning those reactions, and those concerns were legitimate. Once we learned to stop and actually understand what those concerns mean and look for the legitimate reasons behind them, then our messages can change and can be more effective, because they take those reasonings into account.

For example, in west Africa, one prominent case was that of safe burials. People have certain rituals to bury the dead that involve touching the body. Of course, that is a major risk factor for spreading Ebola. So once the concerns were understood, then those practices – those recommended practices of not actually coming in contact with the body were changed in a way that was acceptable to local people, and that helped prevent further spread.

That's sort of the general idea, and this notion of having social input at the time became a turning point for the World Health Organization, as one of its senior officials, Sylvie Briand, said. We see that part of that is now being incorporated into the COVID-19 response. However, a lot of the discourse online is still about debunking rumors and misinformation. That contrast – that disconnect between what we learned a few years ago and what we're seeing now in all of those rumors and misinformations being treated in the same way – that disconnect is what prompted me to make that point.

KENNEALLY: It's very informative, Anita Makri, I think, because that disconnect you described, that impulse to correct the rumor, to correct the misinformation, is one that's misplaced. I'm very much taken with this notion that even as we pay attention to what the medical scientists have to say, there is a role here for social scientists. They can be embedded in the emergency response and create a kind of real-time feedback loop, you call it. Explain that.

MAKRI: Yes. So that's, again, something that emerged in the west Africa context in 2014. There was an anthropology platform set up by the UK-based Institute of Development Studies, and that was led by Professor Melissa Leach. It kind of became a repository of anthropological information and a way for officials to have a way of having that input, and I think it's something that evolved gradually, to the point that now I believe that they have two or three mechanisms of doing that.



One of them is to have briefings – peer-reviewed briefings on issues that the World Health Organization or other agencies might need input about. Another mechanism is to have social scientists embedded on the ground as part of the crisis response in affected countries. That, I guess, has perhaps more of a tradition in developing countries, where there’s a longer history of a humanitarian response of this scale. A third way is to have dialogues with communities – and again, it is something that happens a lot more often in international development, but you might also see it in community briefings or meetings in other countries. So these are things that social scientists have developed.

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2.

KENNEALLY: According to legend, fire devastated the Great Library of Alexandria during the siege of the Egyptian city by Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. Tens of thousands of papyrus scrolls were said to have burned, creating a caesura in the corpus of ancient Greek literature, and the loss to humankind of countless artistic and scientific treasures.

In our own time, when research and analysis is found increasing in digital form, a similar break in the knowledge timeline has started to open.

The recently launched Policy Commons hopes to fireproof the online library of the Internet, at least where it comes to policy, documents, and research papers. Policy Commons makes available for discovery and access nearly 2.5 million documents from thousands of IGOs, NGOs, research centers and think tanks. Toby Green is co-founder, and was previously Chief Operating Officer of Public Affairs and Communications for the Paris-based OECD, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. OECD. I asked him if NGOs like OECD are concerned that their work is getting lost in the ocean of information that is the Internet?

GREEN: The reality is that international organizations like the OECD and the World Bank, and the IMF and the UN family, or non-governmental organizations like Chatham House and Brookings and so on, their main focus is on doing their research and getting the findings of their research and their work out to their stakeholders and, they hope, to a broader public. But they tend not to employ people with publishing skills, and as a result, they push their content out on their websites and they don’t go the next step, which is to add that wrapper of metadata around the content that happens in scholarly publishing, and therefore makes the content fragile, it makes it at risk of disappearing.

KENNEALLY: I thought at first this was a preservation challenge, but you make it sound more like an organizational challenge.



GREEN: When I joined the OECD, I was actually quite shocked when I got there to find what was in effect a mid-size publishing operation, they put out about 300 books a year. But they did so in their own peculiar manner, by the only standardized system that they used that was in common with the publishing industry, were ISBNs. But everything else, they did themselves. They even did their own printing. They didn't use any of the standard systems. Their content wasn't discoverable in the main discovery channels.

Curiously, when I visited libraries and introduced myself, and the librarian would say oh, yes, we've got all your books, come over here, and they would actually lead me usually to a room at the back of the library which would be full of all of what they called the official documents. And there, organized in alphabetical order, you would find all of the World Bank content, all the IMF content, the OEC contents, and so on.

I realized that there was this treatment of governmental official and non-governmental organization that's treated differently to scholarly publishing, it's managed differently. Therefore as a result, it was ignored, and the usage of the content was incredibly low.

So what I set out to do at the OECD was to basically normalize the way that the OECD did its publishing, and to use the tools and the techniques used by scholarly publishing, and to push the OECD to make sure they were using the same tools and techniques.

So we started using DOIs, and we started getting our metadata into the main discovery engines and so on, so forth. We built something called the iLibrary, which is a platform that behaves just like any other scholarly publishers platform, and you can cite the works in the same way, and the things that are compatible with the citation tools and so on.

So when I left the OECD just over a year ago, I got together with Stephen Rhind-Tutt, partly with an eye on solving this problem, to basically build an iLibrary, if you like, for the NGO/IGO/think tank content because we know that this content is sitting out there, we know it's fragile, we know it disappears, links break. When funding runs out, particularly from a smaller think tank or a smaller NGO – when that funding runs out, that website is just simply switched off. There is no locks or clocks or portico for this content. Worst of all, this content just isn't found. It's really hard to find.

KENNEALLY: And the way you refer to this content, Toby, is as wild content. In other words, in contrast to this tamed or domesticated content that can be fairly easily found in libraries. And this concern for taming this content isn't just a professional matter, but it really does have an impact on our lives. You make the case that there has been a tremendous amount of research done on pandemics in the past, and that research has been difficult to access at this moment when we need it the most.



GREEN: Quite. Last year in October there was an event which modelled a coronavirus pandemic in NY – I mean the event was in New York. It modelled a coronavirus. It was well supported, it was organized by the Johns Hopkins University, who are now famous for their coronavirus data with the World Economic Forum, and backed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. They got together a team of experts, and they spent a whole day modelling what would happen. The results of that meeting are on their website. That’s it. And I challenged libraries to say, OK, well, how many of you have got that content in your library systems? Who’s archiving that content in the long run? When that website gets switched off or it gets corrupted or something, who’s going to look after that content? Well no one is. Within a fortnight of that event, two NGOs put out reports about the state of the world’s preparedness for pandemics. This content was published last year. It’s there, it’s freely available, but no one knows how to access it because it just doesn’t appear in discovery systems. And it can disappear.

3.

When the UK’s Publisher Association set a goal for its industry to have at least 50% of leadership and executive-level roles occupied by women, the target date was 2022. PA’s latest annual diversity and inclusion survey found that 55% of the British industry senior leadership and executive roles were held by women in 2019, three years ahead of schedule. That’s a success to celebrate, even while the industry recognizes that more work remains.

In March 2019, Sheikha Bodour Al Qasimi, then vice president of the International Publishers Association, and Maria Pallante, president and CEO of the Association of American Publishers, organized the first PublisHer dinner. PublisHer community events have gone online during the pandemic, but they continue to encourage industry leaders to envision creative, viable solutions to lingering gender-based inequities.

AL QASIMI: Since I joined the publishing world about 12 years ago, I’ve been moving in publishing circles on a local, on a regional, and on an international level. While I learned a lot about the industry, about its potential in transforming lives and boosting economies, an observation emerged along the way, which is that women across all levels of the publishing world were not getting a fair deal in this industry. And while there are many women in the publishing workforce, few of them are in key leadership positions, and I always wondered the reason behind this imbalance, but I kept it to myself.

And then when I started sharing my views with colleagues, it turned out that I wasn’t the only woman with such questions. Maria Pallante, as you mentioned, had a similar concern. And a lot of my female colleagues across the world shared this view, and actually, there were some male colleagues as well who had similar questions, which was great to know. There is a big gender



inequality at leadership levels, there are pay gaps, there are challenges with working cultures, and a host of other barriers that really don't make any sense in this day and age.

So to cut a long story short, I decided to take action and address these issues, and that was the reason behind the birth of PublisHer.

KENNEALLY: With all the work you're doing, Bodour, you're getting a pretty good picture of how well publishing is really addressing the challenge to be more diverse and more inclusive, particularly when it comes to promoting women into leadership roles. How well do you think the industry is doing? Maybe you can offer some suggestions for ways that they could advance this cause.

AL QASIMI: Diversity and inclusivity are values that IPA cherishes dearly, and that gives us a solid ground upon which we can start these discussions. So PublisHer is built on consultations and conversations. It's also built on collective action. We are in the phase right now of collecting and packing feedback, and we'll engage with the right decision-makers so that we can change the current culture. And finally, we want to establish some kind of mentoring program that will help to groom the right talent to advance in leadership ladder of our industry.

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KENNEALLY: In the Information Age, public policy and personal practice depend on the hard principles of accuracy and evidence-based reporting. Less substantial yet equally essential are concepts of trust and empathy. A possible lesson drawn from the COVID-19 crisis this year is to seek balance. Moderation in all things, including information.

This podcast series is brought to you each week by Copyright Clearance Center.

Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing.

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I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening. Best wishes for the coming year.