



Publishers Face Storms of Change In 2020 2020 Year-in-review

Special guests

- [Ken Doctor](#), founder of [Lookout Local](#)
- [Mark Gottlieb](#), literary agent with [Trident Media Group](#)
- [Lisa Luedeke](#), publisher and director at [Corwin Press](#)
- [Kevonne Holloway](#), Vice President, Education Content, [Elsevier](#)

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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.

As COVID-19 spread around the earth in the early months of 2020, digital disruption followed close behind. The results for publishing are decidedly mixed. Local newspapers suffered when local businesses shuttered. By contrast, book sales surged, though the industry faces disruption from consolidation.

In mid-year, a wave of protests against police shootings of black men and women focused attention on systemic racism and its damaging cost to society. Publishers, among many other organizations, seized the chance for self-examination.

In this second episode of a three-part review for 2020, we learn how publishers are navigating through storms of change.



KENNEALLY: As the American economy shuttered under lockdown limitations to halt the coronavirus pandemic, ongoing enterprises were reduced to a handful – grocery markets, pharmacies, home supplies, and hardware stores. These businesses serve our basic needs of shelter and sustenance. What of those that feed our appetite for information? Are they not essential, too?



Factual local journalism is indeed essential in an age of fear and misinformation, asserts Ken Doctor, a leading news industry analyst and political columnist who blogs at Newsonomics and is a regular guest commentator on cable news and public radio.

KENNEALLY: The cases mount, the deaths sadly mount with it. But we are also an accompanying transformation of business of all kinds around the country, indeed, around the world. As you follow the news industry, you are seeing the impact coronavirus in accelerating the timeline for transformation.

DOCTOR: The local newspaper companies have failed to transition enough. They're still far too dependent on print, they are too dependent on advertising. They haven't made enough progress in digital products or in digital audience, or in digital subscriptions. And they have been losing advertising, they've been losing revenue, they've been cutting staff to maintain profitability. As I've talked to them, and I talk to people all the time in the industry, they would say well, we have a plan, or we think we'll have a plan when this thing goes mainly digital.

This basically has caused an acceleration, the COVID-19 crisis, to 2025. The realities of what people thought they had a few years to get to are now right upon them, and so those are forcing what may be, in some of these cases, life or death decisions for their publications.

KENNEALLY: It's pretty straightforward. If there are no more car dealerships, there are no more car ads. If there are no more venues for clubs and theaters and ballet troupes and the rest of it, there are no ads for those operations, as well. Essentially if there is no activity, there is no advertising.

DOCTOR: That is right. So those publishers that are most exposed to advertising have the most problem. And we can see this in the alternative press, these city weeklies that you see in most big cities. They have lost as much as 80% of their advertising when the daily newspapers have lost 30% to 50% going into April.

And why 80%? Well, it's because they are totally oriented to what you described, city life, things, doing stuff in the community, and if that is suspended, their businesses are in worse shape.

So how do you create a product, how do you have good enough content, how do you have people who write for what I call "skim and expand," so we can read briefly, and then read more deeply later, how do you have businesspeople who know how to do business intelligence and audience development?



These are all skills that are not new skills anymore in 2020. They were new skills in 2010, but the people who have these skills, who tend to be somewhere in their 20s or their 30s, they both don't want to work for newspaper companies because they would say, why do I want to work on something that's going out of business? And oftentimes newspapers can't compete for them in terms of salary.

So without the right people, and it is, Chris, just as an absolutely fundamental point that a lot of people miss, without the right people, you can't really turn this around.

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KENNEALLY: Announced in October 2012 and completed the following July, the merger of Penguin and Random House reduced the big six by one. In the years since, trade book publishing has counted its leading houses on the fingers of one hand. But the count is changing again.

In late November 2020, PRH agreed to purchase Simon & Schuster, one of the Big 5, for more than \$2 billion. While the acquisition creates what the New York Times called the first mega-publisher, we may yet have a Big 5.

If you're wondering just who is the insurgent publisher, then ask Alexa. The Amazon smart speaker and virtual assistant is one element of a multifaceted effort to make Amazon a leading force in publishing trade books for children and adults.

Over two decades, says literary agent Mark Gottlieb of Trident Media Group. Amazon has become a dominant player in book sales. Amazon Publishing, launched in 2009, is also on the rise.

GOTTLIEB: For a long time, Amazon, they were really sort of the new kids on the block. And because of all of the, let's say, changes in the marketplace, a lot of people have received them and still hold them with a lot of skepticism throughout major trade book publishing. But I think they've really become not just in the retail sector, but as a publisher, a force to be reckoned with for a number of reasons, one being that having filled the ebook space, that has really, for one, replaced the mass-market format.

I think that Amazon is really here to fill a space, given that they have bookstores, they have a meaningful publishing sector, and the technological know-how.

What Amazon is able to do, not just as a publisher but also a retailer, is very similar to what publishers used to do, where you had a publisher like Scribner, for instance, where they had their bookstore in the lobby of the building. Or you had a publisher like Scholastic – they're still very strong in the school and library market, but they also used to likewise have a bookstore in the



lobby of their building. Amazon really owns their online storefront in that way, and they can place a lot of their own titles there. Just look at the Amazon top 100 and see how many titles there are from Amazon imprints.

Early on, they try to nominate books for a lot of programs in order to market and promote them in their online channels. And what they're doing is they're creating a level of exclusivity during the preorder period before a book even publishes or within the first timeframe of publication where people can only go to Amazon to get a book.

But what they're willing to do in those instances in approaching agents and authors is they say not only will we put your book in the program and promote it in the program, we will pay you for that window of exclusivity, a payment non-applicable against the book advance. To an agent and to an author who typically, even in major trade book publishing, it can be like pulling teeth just to get a book publisher to properly market and promote a book. Now, here's a publisher who comes along and says not only will we market and promote your book, but we'll pay you to let us do it. I mean, it sounds very attractive to an author.

KENNEALLY: A publishing dictionary defines “crashing” as putting pedal to the metal when it comes to a book manuscript. “Crashed” books are published on an accelerated schedule to meet reader demand and adjust to dynamic market conditions.

In March, when the world flipped from physical to virtual to combat the first wave of the novel coronavirus pandemic, K-12 education shifted its setting from homerooms to rooms in homes. And while distance learning wasn't new, families and teachers both needed to learn fast about making the digital grade.

Editors at Corwin, a SAGE publishing company and leading provider of professional learning books and products, determined to move fast, too. In just weeks, Corwin Press published *The Distance Learning Playbook*, a project that usually would have taken 18 months.

Even more quickly, *The Distance Learning Playbook* became a K to 12 educational industry bestseller and has generated a series of books and resources for parents, university educators and school leaders. Lisa Luedeke is publisher and director at Corwin Press.

LUEDEKE: It was absolutely a race against time. It was mid-May, and we knew that there was a short window for teachers to – and schools – to do their professional learning before the fall classes started. We knew that people needed the book immediately – at the latest, beginning in July and going into August because most schools start in September in the East and some even earlier, in August, in the west part of the country.



I didn't even know – and I've been publishing for 22 years – I didn't know that we could actually pull this off. But some folks at SAGE said yes, we can, if we get everybody on board across the company. basically, it was drop everything and do this particular book. All other projects had to be put aside, so that the people on my team, for example, who are responsible for clearing permissions in the book dropped everything else and focused on that. Our production team dropped everything – all the other projects they were doing – and focused on this one book. I don't think they'd ever done anything like it, either, and we all, I think, sort of surprised ourselves that we were able to pull it off.

KENNEALLY: The book has since gone on to become a bestseller on the PW list. But what was it that you had to do next as far as getting the audience's attention for the book?

LUEDEKE: Yeah. Again, it was drop everything and run with it, and that was left to our marketing team. We put together a package that included the digital version and the print version, so that people would get the print version afterward, when it was available, because that's what most people in our industry want is a paperbound book. So they got the digital version, then the print version came along, and word spread like wildfire. One school district of another started adopting it, and July and August were just insane months, because we were trying to print enough to keep up. And at the beginning, we weren't able to.

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KENNEALLY: Individuals and organizations took a fresh look in 2020 at the extent to which race consciously and unconsciously influences all of us. Where do we find such racism in publishing? In the experience of encountering individual racism on a personal level. In the institutional racism ingrained in the processes and culture of institutions. And to the extent to which race and racism are ingrained into how we create, publish, and disseminate knowledge.

From Elsevier employees in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States, I learned how the company is empowering staff to be aware of issues in equity, inclusion, and diversity, and to become active in efforts to accelerate change. A key element is engaging in what Kevonne Holloway, Vice President, Education Content, calls “courageous conversations.”

HOLLOWAY: Outside of the ideas from the employees that came up during the courageous conversations, I think one of the a-ha moments for me was just people sharing their experiences and helping others understand so that we can all meet each other where we're at. That's really important when you start talking about race and ethnicity – being able to meet someone where they are at based on the experiences that they've had and the experiences that you've had and being able to bridge that gap.



So by sharing through courageous conversations, you get to a place where you may not have realized things like microaggressions or understood what microaggressions were, but through this process, your eyes are opened, and it's a learning experience. And when you learn, typically it's when you're outside of your comfort zone. By stepping outside your comfort zone and learning about race and ethnicity and how it impacts not only your colleagues, but people within your community and people at home in your own social circle, it makes you feel more empowered as an individual and armed with information so that you can actually help be a positive driver for change.

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KENNEALLY: The editors of the Oxford English Dictionary have admitted they despaired of choosing a single word-of-the-year for 2020. Instead, the OED noted the memorable addition to our vocabularies of many words: *lockdown*, *unmute*, *coronavirus* (of course) – and my favorite, *Blursday*.

How do we best respond in the face of twelve tumultuous months? Can words ever capture events in a satisfying way? The best place to start is to start.

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.