

Against the Grain

Volume 25 | Issue 1

Article 8

February 2013

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Recommended Citation

O'Leary, Brian F. (2013) "Context First: A Unified Theory of Publishing," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 25: Iss. 1, Article 8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6409>

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Context First: A Unified Field Theory of Publishing

by **Brian F. O'Leary** (Founder and Principal, Magellan Media) <brian.oleary@magellanmediapartners.com>

The way we think about book, magazine, and newspaper publishing is unduly governed by the physical containers we use to transmit information. Those containers define content in two dimensions, necessarily ignoring that which cannot or does not fit.

Worse, the process of filling the container strips out the context that is a luxury in the physical world but a critical asset in digital ones. In our evolving, networked world — the world of “content in browsers” — we are no longer selling content, or at least not content alone. We compete on context.

The current workflow hierarchy — container first, limiting content and context — is already outdated. To compete digitally, we must start with context and preserve its connection to content, so that both discovery and utility are enhanced.

We need to think about containers as an option, not the starting point. Further, we must organize our content in ways that make it interoperable across platforms, users, and uses. Doing so will start to open up access, making it possible for readers to discover and consume our content within and across digital realms.

Without a shift in publishing mindset, we remain vulnerable to a range of current and future disruptive entrants. Containers limit how we think about our audiences. In stripping context, they also limit how audiences find our content.

Here, scale is not our friend. It may well be the enemy. When disruptive technologies enter a market, they don't look or feel like what we typically value. Often enough, the disruptors offer solutions that are cheaper, simpler, smaller, and more convenient than their traditional analogues.

We see this today, at the outskirts of our industry, where smaller, more nimble digital upstarts have reversed the publishing paradigm. The new entrants start with context, vital to digital discoverability and trial, and use it to strengthen content. Many startups forego containers, or they create them only as a rendering of personal (consumer) preference.

Think Craigslist. Think Monster. Think Cookstr, a born-digital food site that started with and continues to evolve its taxonomy. Context first.

Imagine a world in which content authoring and editing tools are cheap, even free, storage is plentiful, even virtual, and content can be disseminated in a range of formats, at the figurative or literal push of a button. That world exists today, with literally dozens of credible, widely-accessible tools and resources.

The thing is, while that world is already here, it is far from evenly distributed.

While publishers think of agile workflows as an opportunity to drive down the cost of

making content for containers, a newer breed of “born-digital” competitors have developed workflows that start with context. These new entrants are evolving taxonomies and refining tools so that they can invade the same niches we thought we were making more efficient.

The challenge publishers face is not just being digital — it's being demonstrably relevant to the audiences who now turn first to digital to find content. Only after we fill the physical container do we turn our attention to rebuilding the digital roots of content: the context, including tags, links, research, and unpublished material, that can get lost on the cutting-room floor.

Most of that context never makes it back. We have taken to using things like title-level metadata, some search engine optimization, and occasionally effective use of syndication as proxies for something contextually rich. Competing as we are against the “born-digital,” that's not nearly enough.

Further, we treat readers as if their needs can be defined by containers. But in a digital world, search takes place before physical sampling, much more often than the reverse. Readers may at times look for a specific product, but more often they search for an answer, a solution, a spark that turns into an interest and perhaps a purchase.

Publishers are in the business of linking content to markets, but we're hamstrung at search because we've made context the last thing we think about.

When content scarcity was the norm, we could live with a minimum of context. In a limited market, our editors became skilled in making decisions about what would be published. Now, in an era of abundance, editors have inherited a new and fundamentally different role: figuring out how “what is published” will be discovered.

We need to use the tools we have (as well as ones we have yet to develop) to make containers an output of digital workflows, not the source of content in those workflows. This is a fundamental change in our approach, but it is the only way that I see to compete in a digital-first, content-abundant universe.

And I don't think that this change in mindset (or workflow) will come easily.

Investing in context is now a requirement. Unfortunately, our product focus and an obsession with scale lead us to worry more about finding ways to reduce costs. In trying to make the physical object incrementally better, we optimize the creation, production, and delivery of content in a single package.

Along the way, we miss opportunities to create agile, discoverable, and accessible content. I call this situation “container myopia,” paying homage to **Ted Levitt's** 1960 article, “Marketing Myopia.” In the article, **Levitt** called on marketers to shift from a product-centered to a customer-centered paradigm. He famously showed how railroad companies failed to see that they were in the transportation business, much as publishers have struggled to see that they are in the content solutions business.

In a digital realm, true content solutions are increasingly built with open APIs, something containers are pretty bad at. APIs — application programming interfaces — provide users with a roadmap that lets them access content in ways that make sense for them.

The physical forms of books, magazines and newspapers have user interfaces that predate APIs. We've all figured out how to access the information contained in these physical products. But, the physical form itself does not always make for a good user interface, something that Craigslist, the Huffington Post, Cookstr and others have capitalized on.

Open up your API, I contend, or someone else will.

Many current audiences (and all future ones) live in an open and accessible environment. They expect to be able to look under the hood, mix and match chunks of content, and create, seamlessly, something of their own.

Readers expect access, or they invent it. What **Kirk Biglione** has said about DRM leads me to see piracy as the consequence of a bad API. The future of content involves giving readers access to the rules, tools, and opportunities of contextually-rich content, so that they can engage with it on their own terms.

And whether they say it just like this or not, readers want good APIs. Content is part of a value chain that solves readers' problems. Readers expect publishers to point them to the outcomes or answers they want, where and when they want them. We're interested in content solutions that don't waste our time.

Perhaps most daunting: readers expect that their content solutions will improve over time. They don't care that much (or at all) about how it happens. Companies that are good at aggregating solutions will reduce the time and hassle involved in finding and buying something. Those firms have a leg up on their competitors.

These ideas are evident in aggregators like **Amazon**. They're embodied in services like Kobo and Kindle. They're not just products; they're solutions.

As low- or no-cost authoring, repository, and distribution tools and resources become freely available, it is axiomatic that ours has become and will remain an era of content abundance. And content abundance is the precursor to the development (and maintenance) of context.

When there was only the *Gutenberg Bible*, we didn't need Dewey. When booksellers were smaller and largely independent, we didn't have much need for BISAC codes. And before online sales made almost every book in print evident and available, ONIX was an unattended luxury.

Context can't be just a preference or an afterthought any more. Early and deep tagging is a search reality. In structural terms, our content fits search conventions, or it will not be referenced. And in contextual terms, our content needs to be deeply and consistently tagged, or it will face an increasingly tough time being found.

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We can't afford to build context into content after the fact. Doing so irrevocably truncates the deep relationships that authors and editors create and often maintain until the day, hour, or minute that containers render them impotent. Building back those lost links is redundant, expensive, and ultimately incomplete.

This isn't a problem of standards. At **Indiana University**, **Jenn Riley** and **Devin Becker** have vividly illustrated our abundance of contextual frameworks. The problem we face, the one we avoid at our peril, is implementing these standards.

Ultimately, that's a function of workflow.

If you want to change workflow, you are looking at the publishing equivalent of a heart transplant. And starting with context requires publishers to make fundamental changes in their content workflows.

At a time when we struggle to create something as simple as a clean ONIX feed, planning for and preserving connections to content is a challenge of significant proportion. New entrants are already upon us, and we don't have much time to get this new challenge right. But in a digital era, how publishers work is how they ultimately compete.

Although the precise changes in workflow will vary by publisher, certain principles apply. Moving from "product" to "service" or "solutions" means four things for publishers:

- Content must become open, accessible, and interoperable. Adherence to standards will not be an option;
- We'll need to focus more clearly on using context to promote discovery;
- Trying to compete with businesses that already use low- and no-cost tools is a losing proposition. We need to develop opportunities that encourage broader use of our content; and
- Publishers can distinguish ourselves by providing readers with tools that draw upon context to help them manage abundance.

Given these four implications, it seems clear that the publishing community will need new skill sets to compete in an era of abundance. We'll probably have to add a lot more training than we have ever done internally. Nevertheless, those aren't the toughest challenges. Changing workflow is.

It is a time of remarkable opportunity in publishing, one in which we are able to find and build upon strands of stories, in context. Yes, we face a significant challenge preparing for a very different world, but it is a challenge I think we have the insight and experience to meet. What we choose to do now will begin to determine which stories get told, as well as who writes — and publishes — them.

Author's Bio

Brian O'Leary is founder and principal of **Magellan Media**, a management consulting firm that works with publishers seeking support in content operations, benchmarking, and financial analysis. **O'Leary** writes extensively about issues affecting the publishing industry. With **Hugh McGuire**, he is editing "Book: A Futurist's Manifesto," a collection of forward-looking essays on publishing that is being published in three parts by **O'Reilly Media**. 🍀

against the grain people profile

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Brian F. O'Leary

BORN AND LIVED: Born in Melrose, Massachusetts. Grew up in Massachusetts and have lived in Chicago, New York, Singapore and New Jersey.

EARLY LIFE: Attended **St. John's Preparatory School** (Danvers, MA), **Harvard College** (Cambridge, MA) and Harvard Business School (Boston, MA)

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: From 1983 to 1995, various operational roles on three **Time Inc.** weeklies, including *TIME* magazine. From 1995 to 1998, senior vice president and associate publisher for **Hammond Inc.**, a reference publisher now owned by **Langenscheidt**. Since 1998, a consultant to magazine, book and association publishers.

FAMILY: Married to **Elizabeth W. McCarthy**; three children.

IN MY SPARE TIME: I try to golf and occasionally garden; have volunteered as an elected member of a board of education and a trustee of my high school.

FAVORITE BOOKS: *Look Homeward Angel* (**Thomas Wolfe**), *Out of Control* (**Kevin Kelly**), *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (**Tracy Kidder**).

PET PEEVES: I don't do too well with rudeness.

PHILOSOPHY: Socially liberal, fiscally conservative, but always in that order.

MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Presenting "Context first," which had been illustrated by my oldest child, who is an artist, to an audience of 1,400 people at **O'Reilly Media's** "Tools if Change" conference in New York in 2011.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: To put some of my ideas to the test (in a non-consulting role), to write and publish at least one book, and to have at least one year during which I don't work on any Saturdays, Sundays, or holidays.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: In established markets, sales of physical and digital objects — containers — will be flat or fall slightly; prices will fall as well, putting pressure on most publishers. Unit growth in emerging markets will be more robust, but prices will not match those seen in the past in established markets. Cultivating global communities and meeting their content requirements will become a way for content producers to differentiate themselves. Success here will leverage increasingly sophisticated metadata and the enormous reach offered by the Internet. 🍀



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A special challenge for librarians is understanding what books mean to readers who rely on librarians to select, distribute, and pay for eBooks — or any book, for that matter. This is one of the recurrent themes in **Umberto Eco** and **Jean-Claude Carrière's** book *This is Not the End of the Book*. **Eco**, the author of *The Name of the Rose*, *Foucault's Pendulum*, and *Theory of Semiotics*, and **Carrière**, a screen writer for **Godard** and **Bunuel**, speak at length about the book's future in the Internet age.

Eco and **Carrière** say many things comprehensible to librarians and many things that won't make sense. You would need to agree with **Nicholson Baker**, another author whose passion for the book often brings him in conflict with how librarians think and act. **Baker** is convinced that librarians can't be trusted to preserve knowledge through the book's legacy. **Eco**, for example, states immediately what he said almost two decades ago about the Internet, computers, and the book. The book, like the

spoon or the corkscrew is a technology at the limit of its form and expression. You can't make a better spoon, and you can't improve upon the book as a way to communicate themed and nuance information, at length, with some sobriety, style, and meaning.

This is very much an aesthetic, scholarly, intellectual, and humanitarian view of the book. Yet it does acknowledge the book as a basic unit in cultural memory and transmission. Read it to test your knowledge of incunabula in an electronic age. Memorize their photographs — faculty like these guys would cost you dearly in patron-driven purchase. They want it all...

Your Citation:

This is Not the End of the Book: A Conversation Curated by Jean-Philippe de Tonnac

Author: **Jean-Claude Carrière**; **Umberto Eco**; **Jean-Philippe de Tonnac** (London : Vintage, 2012.) 🍀