

## Beyond the Book

A Podcast Series on the Business of Writing and Publishing

### **E-Books, ISBNs, and Best Practices** **An interview with Michael Cairns**

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**KENNEALLY:** Not so long ago, a book was an unmistakable object. Then someone came along and started digitizing content, and very soon, books were something else, something much more than ink on dead trees. That transformation, indeed the redefinition of books, matters enormously to readers and publishers, as well as retailers and librarians. Without a way to identify books as they are published, information and creativity could be orphaned. To discuss this challenge, we have on the program today for Beyond the Book, Michael Cairns. Michael, welcome to CCC's podcast.

**CAIRNS:** Hi, Chris. Thank you. It's nice to be here.

**KENNEALLY:** Well, we appreciate your coming on the program. And you're going to be telling us a bit more about a presentation you gave just recently to Digital Book World, a project you worked on with the Book Industry Study Group. And that was identifying e-books, and the whole question of what does it mean to identify e-books, and why we need to do this. But very briefly – because this is frankly a bit of inside baseball until you get into it, and then you go, huh, this is very important stuff – what's at issue right now?

**CAIRNS:** Well, the issue is that for 40 years or so, we've had a method of identifying the content that we sell as publishers, and that's obviously been sold as a physical unit in a bookstore, and the identification has been the ISBN number. And there's been processes put in place around that over time, and the number itself has become embedded within the organizations, not just on the physical unit itself, but they also reflect how royalties are paid and accounting is done and distribution happens and all of those types of things.

**KENNEALLY:** The ISBN truly is a global standard. Maybe we ought to just take a little bit of history here, and you could tell us how the ISBN itself came into being, and maybe why some of the lessons of ISBNs could relate to the challenge today.

**CAIRNS:** Well, as many good practical implementations go, its genesis came out of a real operations issue that a retailer in the UK had, and that was, how do they identify their products through the supply chain that they were operating in, and

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WH Smith in the UK in the late '60s went to the industry standards group in the UK and said, look, we've got this problem. What we'd like to do is establish some type of standards for identifying these items as they travel through our supply chain. And so the group in the UK commissioned a study, and a smart person from the London School of Economics wrote a paper that basically set out exactly what an ISBN would do, how it would work, how it would be created. And they went ahead in the UK and implemented that. It was originally called the SBN without the I for international, because it was a UK thing.

And it was slowly adopted, and an agency in the UK named Whitaker was the agency that managed this. And then a few years later, beginning in the early '70s, they recognized that this is something that they could actually expand beyond the UK, and they recruited a US company called Bowker to actually be the agent in the US, and basically, slowly but surely, the standard then grew internationally. But it was really the UK in the late, you know, '68, '69 timeframe when the standard actually got written.

**KENNEALLY:** Right, and we should tell people, Michael, that this is a subject that you aren't just new to yourself. You are currently Managing Partner at Information Media Partners, which is a business strategy consulting firm specializing in publishing and information products. And indeed, you mentioned the name Bowker. You were President of Information and Database Publishing for Bowker, and really were very deep into all of this, so you understand what makes this important to publishers. But why, if I'm not directly affected by the ISBN, should I also care?

**CAIRNS:** Well, as I was saying earlier, we're in this transition between the sale of a physical book to one that's a digital book, and in that transition, some aspects of the ISBN number are not being upheld as they were in the physical world, where publishers and retailers and other people in the supply chain are not being as diligent applying the structures and the formula around how they view these ISBNs in the physical world, with the way they use it in the digital world. And so what we start to fear is that there's a breakdown in the way ISBNs are being applied to e-books. And when there's a breakdown, that starts to increase the likelihood that the supply chain does not operate as efficiently as perhaps it should or could. And so that's a real issue, and that's one of the things that we're looking at as part of the BISG study group project.

**KENNEALLY:** Right. And Michael, if that doesn't – if that supply chain, as you say, doesn't work, it has an effect on authors, on libraries, on educational institutions, just about anybody who actually handles information is going to lose without

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having some real confidence in knowing that the book that they want to purchase, or want to read, or want to somehow consume, to use the unfortunate term, is the right one.

CAIRNS: Yes, that is true. And there have been cases already – e-books obviously are not – they're extraordinarily popular versus only a few years ago, but they still are a subset of what content is sold. Most content is still sold in print. But there have been issues where, as you say, purchases have been made where either the book had already been acquired and there was an ISBN number that was misapplied, so there was duplication of purchases. There's purchases made where it was completely different title from what was expected. There's just tracking issues from a sales data, for example, process standpoint, or rights issues start to be problematic if you've got issues where an ISBN is not being applied uniquely to the content that you're looking at or trying to track. And those are the – while they're small in number at this point, the issue is, they are indicative of what could potentially be a quite significant problem in the way that the supply chain might break down.

KENNEALLY: Right. And this is a project that is an ongoing one, I understand. But your report at Digital Book World came about after interviewing a number of people and looking at it from a variety of angles. Who was involved in the study?

CAIRNS: So I was asked to make the study in the late summer, and the idea was that we would really drill down and understand exactly what is happening in the supply chain in the industry at the moment. There was a lot of anecdotal discussion and stories about some of the issues that companies were facing. So we very proactively sought to interview people across the spectrum of the industry. So I spoke to well over 70 people. I conducted at least 50 interviews, 35 hours worth of transcripts were recorded. And we looked at both small and large publishers, retailers, wholesalers, distributors, e-books retailers specifically. We tried to be as broad brush as we possibly can. And we also looked in the library market, and made sure that we looked at that segment as well as an area of what turned out to be actually more problematic and more a harbinger of some of the issues that we might face in the consumer segment than I had originally believed would be the case, so I spent a bit more time there than I thought.

KENNEALLY: Right, and what you're driving towards is trying to establish some kind of best practices, but I guess what you saw were plenty of bad practices. Describe some of the issues.

CAIRNS: Well, as you can imagine – or perhaps not – some people who know this business not quite as well as I do would – I wasn't particularly surprised, but the

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ISBN number is being misused in every possible conceivable way you can imagine. So that was a fundamental issue. And while some of that existed in a world where we didn't have the electronic book, I think the situation now is that, in contrast to years past, there was a lot of built-in stopgaps and tripwires that kind of would break away. You would be in a position where you could correct some of the misuse. You could correct some of the bad information and the bad data, or the misuse of the ISBN number. In the e-world, things are moving so much faster, and more importantly, the e-book is now going to be the future of the business, and if we don't have much more rigid standards in place, and processes in place to make sure that this misuse is caught and corrected, then it's really going to have an impact on the veracity of the entire ISBN standard and the way it's applied.

**KENNEALLY:** Right, and what I was thinking, Michael, is that particularly with your experience at Bowker, but just generally looking at the industry, in the past, even in the early days of the digital book, it was publishers who were most concerned about this. They clearly had business reasons for wanting to have consistent identifiers. Today, it is so much easier for anyone to publish a book. An author becomes his own or her own publisher almost immediately these days, and almost prefers to. Is this making it even more difficult, just because we have a publishing community that now includes really anyone with a PC?

**CAIRNS:** Well, it makes things more complicated and more complex, but I wouldn't necessarily say that it should make things harder or more difficult. The ISBN, applied in the correct manner, is a very simple standard, and there's not too much you can get wrong. And so I'm not sure that that's the issue. I think there's as much carelessness at play here than there is a desire to undercut the standard itself. So I'm not exactly sure the root cause of this, but I think that there's some very practical solutions that could have been put in place that would help people better understand why a standard is good for them and the industry, and really how easy it is to actually uphold a set of guidelines and procedures that ensure that the standard is universally correctly applied.

**KENNEALLY:** Well, we're talking with Michael Cairns on Beyond the Book. Michael is Managing Partner of Information Media Partners, and telling us about a study he conducted for the Book Industry Study Group, and has recently made it available through the Digital Book World Conference in New York City. And Michael, you were saying there are some easy things that can be done. Tell us about them.

**CAIRNS:** Well, in the meetings that I had with people, many of the interviewees refer to the ISBN conditions, if you will, and the way that the ISBN is used, as kind of – they use words like guideline and best practice, and they weren't recognizing the

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fact that there's some definitive ways to apply the ISBN number. And so, from that perspective, I would argue that better communication from the ISBN agencies themselves, both in the US as well as the UK and around the world, that really spell out in a lot more detail, and perhaps more aggressively, that these are not necessarily guidelines, they are dictates as to how the ISBN should be applied. And that just speaks to, more generally, the need for better education, more communication within the supply chain, between the agencies, between the publishers and the wholesalers and the retailers, so that people better understand exactly what the environment is and how important standards are generally.

**KENNEALLY:** And with the importance of standards, there are so many different ways of looking at all of this, and what we have to become acquainted with now that publishing is as much a technology business as it is a literary one or an information one, is this wonderful word, metadata. Where does metadata come into all of this? The ISBN would be a piece of metadata, I presume.

**CAIRNS:** ISBN is a piece of metadata. One of the aspects of the study that I didn't anticipate being part of the scope of the study was the simple fact that metadata is still not adequately managed within the industry. And metadata is the stuff that describes what it is you're transmitting. So if you've got a book, a physical book or an e-book, there's a bunch of information that surrounds that that describes what that book is, and it's everything from the basic title and author, publisher, number of pages, subject matter. Those types of things could be 200 or so fields of information that describe what it is you're selling. And to a degree, the larger publishers are reasonably good, some of them are very good, at describing those print products. But universally, unfortunately, not so many publishers are good at describing the e-book versions of those books.

And so what became clear during the interviews – particularly with people in the middle of the supply chain and the end of the supply chain, so in the wholesaler and the data aggregator and the retailer interviews – that there's a real concern that metadata is not adequately invested in by publishers, and particularly, there's a breakdown between information supplied to describe e-books versus its print companion or cousin. And not enough time is spent making sure that that e-book metadata is robust. There's concern that, over time, it has a tendency to rust, and there's what we call data rot. And so part of the recommendation was that we need to really, again, yet again, beat the drum about making sure that metadata is properly managed, and it's an important part of what you do as a publisher in order to sell your product.

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**KENNEALLY:** Right, and it's something that we care about at Copyright Clearance Center, I must say. So it has an impact not only on that first purchase, that first relationship with the customer, but in a continuing relationship with other publishers, with other customers, in order to get the rights to reuse something, you have to be able to identify it properly. So this is something that really has a long lifetime, it would seem to me.

**CAIRNS:** It does. And it not only has a long lifetime, but it evolves over time, and for example, you might have applied three keywords or three subjects to a book or an e-book, and two years later, something happens in the wider world where you would want to apply it a third or fourth, or fourth or fifth. And to the extent that you would want to do that would be to generate more sales, because people would be looking for those fourth and fifth keywords when they do their searches when they look for titles in that subject area. So you'd want to maintain that additional information, so you'd want to revisit your metadata periodically. So it's very important. It's a very important aspect of selling your titles.

**KENNEALLY:** Well, you know, Michael, it's not an easy subject to discuss. You've done a good job, I think, at kind of laying it out for us in ways that anybody familiar with the business, or even just a reader, could understand. Let me ask you finally about the global aspect of all of this. When ISBNs emerged, as you described, in the late '60s, that came out of the UK, and eventually became truly international. This was a study you made of, I presume, the US industry about an international standard. What's the tension there right now? Is the US going to be able to lead others? Do we already have a coalition coming together around a need to address all of this? How do things look at a global level?

**CAIRNS:** Well, the tension point really is between the U.S. and the rest of the world at this particular point in time, not so much through practice, because practice has kind of moved on in the U.S., but the actual specifications of how the ISBN number is supposed to be applied differ from what the US would like to do and what the rest of the world is doing. And by that I mean, the ISBN standard itself, applied globally, specifies that an ISBN number should be given to the actual product that's sold to a consumer. So an ISBN number should be applied to a Nook version, or a Kindle version, or a Kobo version, or a CourseSmart version, and so on and so forth. And in practice, that's not the way it's being done in the US. And so the tension is between the way we're doing it here versus the way it's being done in the rest of the world. And the rest of the world can't yet understand why the US has such a difficulty about this particular subject.

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And I think the root cause there is the fact that the U.S. market is so much further advanced in this transition from print to E that the rest of the world really can't understand the practical realities of what it means to manage significant metadata, and on that scale. The actual understanding of what a business case might be in applying an ISBN to that base unit, the Nook unit or the Kobo unit – because what we found in the U.S. is there really isn't one. There's no real advantage to a publisher to apply an ISBN at that level. And so I think that there's this kind of disconnect mainly because – I think anyway – that the two markets, if you will, the U.S. and the rest of the world, aren't really playing on the same field, that the U.S. is much more advanced and the rest of the world has yet to catch up as to what really is going on with this transition.

KENNEALLY: Well, that's an interesting point, and certainly with the way things are moving – and I believe that this year Europe is about to see a real e-book moment the way that we did in the last couple of years. Maybe there'll be some catch up getting played, and we'll be coming together fairly quickly. We'll have to all wait and see, and we'll turn to Michael Cairns from time to time for an update on all of this. Michael Cairns is Managing Partner of Information Media Partners, and has done a report for the Book Industry Study Group on the whole challenge of e-book identification and ISBNs. Michael, thank you so much for joining us today on Beyond the Book.

CAIRNS: Great, I'm glad to have joined you. Thank you.

KENNEALLY: Well, we've enjoyed chatting with Michael Cairns, and for everyone at Copyright Clearance Center, this is Chris Kenneally, reminding you that you can learn all about Beyond the Book and Copyright Clearance Center at our Facebook page, which is simply [facebook.com/beyondthebook](https://www.facebook.com/beyondthebook). So drop in there, like us, and get all the latest news about publishing and upcoming previews of our programs. Again, for all of us at Copyright Clearance Center, this is Chris Kenneally wishing you a great day.

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