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Profile-Brian F. O'Leary

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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 themselves 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.

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