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## People Profile: Karen Christensen

Editor

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media is the driver, as if human behavior and human needs are being transformed by the technologies we develop, and ignore the fact that the new technologies may have negative social consequences. In actuality, social media are allowing us to do things humans have always done, but faster and on a larger scale. The vast amount of letter writing and diary keeping done by people until recent decades has been moved to other media, so it's not so much that people are generating more content (although perhaps they are); but that they are sharing it more widely. This has positive aspects (allowing people who would otherwise feel isolated to find kindred spirits) but it has negative ones as well (and not just online stalking; hours browsing through silly videos on YouTube doesn't exactly help most people advance in their careers or become better parents).

### True Connections and Community

A desire for connection and community is one of the reasons people turn to social media. In today's torrent of information, we're all worried that we're going to miss something truly important. **Dave Pollard**, one of the best-known bloggers on social media, wrote recently that "civilization makes finding people much harder than it was for gatherer-hunter cultures where the number of people you could expect to meet and know in a lifetime was small." Well, not exactly: finding people is harder only because our expectations have grown so much, and because we're afraid of missing out on the elusive perfect partner — just as we're worried about missing out on an essential piece of information.

But practical limitations continue to operate. Some forms of social media require users to update and adjust their personal data continually — something that could easily become a full-time job! (And the database becomes an asset of the company sponsoring the medium.) As one online commentator put it, "**LinkedIn** is the digital equivalent of a chain letter. If you really want to contact a friend of a friend (of a friend), just pick up the phone or send an email. If the only way you can reach someone is through this nutty online social pyramid scheme, you don't deserve to be taken seriously. And I can guarantee that you won't be."

What surprises me is that the online world hasn't yet grasped that what's worth paying for is the elimination of things you don't want. That's why busy people go to specialist stores or have assistants to sort their mail. Part of what publishers do — and our customers pay for — is turn down the bulk of the material submitted to us for publication.

The evolution of encyclopedias shows this. Centuries ago, it was difficult to find enough information, and the miracle of encyclopedias was that they offered something about everything, a range of knowledge one could not otherwise access. But today they serve a selective purpose: a subject encyclopedia provides a limited range of high-quality information

*against the grain*  
**people profile**

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**Karen Christensen**

**BORN & LIVED:** Born in Indiana, grew up in Minnesota and California. Adult life divided between London (pop 7.5 million) and Great Barrington, Massachusetts (pop. 7.5 thousand).

**EARLY LIFE:** Books were my lifeline.

**FAMILY:** Anthropologist husband, **David Levinson**, whose expertise is homelessness, substance abuse, and spousal abuse (this took some explaining to my friends). Children: **Tom** 21 and **Rachel** 18.

**EDUCATION:** **UC Santa Barbara**, independent research, and, most important, the hundreds of scholars I work with on subjects ranging from world history to leadership.

**FIRST JOB:** Farm laborer.

**PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES:** A decade in academic and literary publishing in the U.K., at **Blackwells** and **Faber & Faber**, followed by several years as freelance journalist and author before cofounding of **Berkshire Publishing Group** in 1998. Author of a number of popular environmental books, which have been translated into French, German, Chinese, Japanese, and Thai; editor of various major reference works including the *Encyclopedia of Community* (**Sage** 2004) and *Global Perspectives on the United States* (**Berkshire** 2007). Currently a member of the board of the **Content Division of the Software and Information Industry Association**, the **Text Outline Project (Digital Universe)** advisory committee, and the **Society for New Communications Research** advisory board.

**IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO:** Sweat.

**FAVORITE BOOKS:** This winter, **Anthony Trollope's** *Palliser* and *Barchester* novels.


**PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD:** Evangelists for social media who don't appreciate good writing and the work of editors; traditional publishers who don't know what a blog is.

**PHILOSOPHY:** Walk the talk.

**MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT:** I don't know about meaningful, but it was an achievement to get the first volume of the **T.S. Eliot** *Letters* to press (1988).

**GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW:** Take up aikido again.

**HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS:** Far more conscious of the challenges of sustainability and the climate change crisis, and more attentive to the need for interdisciplinary scholarship and engagement between the academics and practitioners. 🐿



chosen from the vast amount available.

It's troubling that the more we talk about community, the more we lack the real thing. The fact that companies think they can "own" communities (and I've heard this said) does suggest something about the nature of community in the cyber realm. A recent study of what sociologists call social capital showed that a quarter of Americans had no one—not a family member or a friend — to whom they could turn with a serious personal problem. While we can now have a vast number of rather superficial connections with people spread across the globe, in real crises of life we may not have anyone at all to turn to.

But at their best, social networking tools expand our options and connect us with people and ideas that enrich our lives. One of the great challenges we face today is finding ways to integrate the best of new technologies with on-the-ground local community life and with the kind of deep personal relationships we can't walk away from simply by turning off the computer. Exploring the world of the Web — and especially the new ways of connecting and communicating it enables—is a rewarding pursuit for both publishers and information professionals. **Skype** me anytime (karenSchristensen)! 🐿