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## ATG Interviews: Neil Blair Christensen, University of California Press

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# ATG Interviews Neil Blair Christensen

## Digital Business Development Director, University of California Press

by Tom Gilson (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilson@cofc.edu>

and Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

**ATG:** Neil, can you give us a little information about your background?

**NBC:** I'm Danish-Jamaican, born in a small isolated Greenlandic settlement. We later moved to Denmark and I did my MA in Arctic studies with a focus on online anthropology. My work over the past 13 years includes roles in Europe, Asia, and the USA with **Munksgaard, Blackwell, Nature Publishing Group, and Wiley**. During this period, I worked in a range of areas, from digital business development, partnerships, health sciences, and journals to workflow solutions

**ATG:** What caused you to change your career path from anthropology and Arctic studies to publishing?

**NBC:** Back in the day, there was little funding available for my proposed research in networked education in the arctic. Once in publishing I was hooked.

**ATG:** What attracted you to join University of California Press as Digital Business Development Director?

**NBC:** Mission, meaning, and great ideas. In my mind, UC Press is extraordinarily well positioned to craft a digital "do-no-evil" ethos



around community, transparency, knowledge curation, and crediting. As part of the **University of California**, we belong to one of the greatest knowledge networks in the world and are located in a region with unrivalled digital expertise. If there were ever a time and a place to join a university press with a knowledge-based and non-profit digital mission, this would be it. So here I am.

**ATG:** What do you mean by a digital "do no evil" ethos? Why is that important to you?

**NBC:** I mean publishing that supports rather than exploits the academy. It is important because advancing the academy is core to our mission.

**ATG:** This is a new position for UC Press. What do you see as your first priority(ies) or objective(s) in this new role?

**NBC:** First priorities are to listen, digest, and ask questions of the team internally and our strong external network of partners, including authors and librarians. My colleagues have done amazing work in setting a strategic direction, and much of my initial work now is to tease out, test, and build digital product concepts that speak to the strategy.

**ATG:** Can you tell us what that "strategic direction" is? Broadly speaking, what type digital products fit that strategy?

**NBC:** Very broadly speaking, products that build and leverage our UC network, are extensible, and generate new revenues.

**ATG:** In a world where exclusive reliance on print is shifting, particularly in scholarly markets, how do you think UC Press can balance the needs of print publishing alongside the development of digital products?

**NBC:** Requirements are as complex as ever and require parallel business models that can change with technology adoption and publishing business models. We are addressing some of the complexities through an on-going strategic review of our product mix, and building efficiency in our traditional publishing business. Similar to other publishers, we eventually will change to a digital first model, but that doesn't mean that print books will disappear just yet. It simply means that a printed product becomes a version of our digital content, and not the other way around. We pay attention to the needs of the academy, and UC Press can benefit enormously from engaging its mission-driven relationships within the **University of California** network to understand and build need-driven solutions.

**ATG:** One potential route for UC Press in moving to more digital product development could simply be a scale digitization of the wealth of archive materials it holds to reach new audiences and markets. But, of course, any print-based publisher could do this and claim to be "digital" in their strategic thinking. What do you think will set UC Press apart from other UPs and traditional publishers in moving towards digital products? And why?

**NBC:** The very nature of some of the initiatives we are planning will set us apart. We are

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## against the grain people profile

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<http://www.ucpress.edu>

Neil Blair Christensen

**BORN AND LIVED:** Born in Ittoqqortoormiit (Greenland). Lived in Uunarteq, Dundas, Nanortalik (Greenland), Copenhagen (Denmark), Aberdeen, London (UK), New York, San Francisco (USA), and Tokyo (Japan).

**PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES:** My work over the past 13 years includes roles in Europe, Asia, and the USA with **Munksgaard, Blackwell, Nature Publishing Group, and Wiley**. During this period, I worked in a range of areas, from digital business development, partnerships, health sciences, and journals to workflow solutions.

**FAMILY:** My fantastic wife, our dog, and our families scattered across the map.

**IN MY SPARE TIME:** I enjoy hanging out in San Francisco and its fantastic surroundings with family and friends. To counterbalance my digital focus, I produce physical products in my spare time: <http://www.christensenbags.com>.

**FAVORITE BOOKS:** *Endurance, Mars Trilogy.*

**PET PEEVES:** I don't like wasting time.

**PHILOSOPHY:** Keep it simple and adapt to change.

**MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT:** Signing my first society journal from a competing publisher.

**GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW:** As always, looking back with satisfaction. 🐾

poised to launch initiatives that are a real break with a traditional university press approach, while keeping us grounded in research, education, and the commitment to ground-breaking scholarship for which UC Press is known. It may seem a truism, but there's generally a need for slightly less repetitive talk and more doing amongst traditional and university press publishers. Strategy is great but you need products and customers to learn. Ultimately, our actions and the reception of our digital initiatives will set us apart from other publishers.

**ATG:** *That sounds intriguing. In what ways will your initiatives break with the traditional university press approach?*

**NBC:** I can't go into detail at this stage, but the way I see it, as we develop new products we should think more of ourselves as a 100-people start-up with existing annual revenues of +\$22m, affiliated with one of the world's greatest knowledge networks, situated down the road from Silicon Valley, and in search of networked business models that advance science and education. There are start-ups with worse odds that achieve great things, and there are larger publishers that are stuck in their own mud.

**ATG:** *Your background is very much from the perspective of a commercial publisher. How do you think the digital expertise and perspective you have gained can be utilized in the university press environment?*

**NBC:** It helps if you have a good understanding of your commercial competitors and which buttons to push as you set out to change how publishing facilitates the academy in its mission. Our role is not to replicate commercial publishers, but rather to differentiate and serve the academy better. We will use digital technologies and partnerships to scale efficiencies and act in an agile framework. Technologies and processing power that would have been prohibitively expensive for a non-profit organization such as ours are now well within reach. The beauty of new digital technologies is that you are possibly better positioned to take timely advantage of them if you are not a large commercial publisher. We are lighter and can cover greater distances in shorter time, in some instances possibly in collaboration with local Silicon Valley partners.

**ATG:** *In an interview with Alison Mudditt in the December 2011 issue of Against the Grain, she discussed two potential pilot "born digital" products. What initiatives is UC Press working on that you can tell us about now?*

**NBC:** We are working on a broad-scale OA initiative. Though many have dabbled with smaller scale initiatives, to this point, university presses haven't jumped into the deep end with OA. UC Press is exceptionally well placed to play a leading role in OA with

against the grain

## publisher profile

### University of California Press

155 Grand Avenue, Suite 400  
Oakland, CA 94612-3758  
Phone: (510) 883-8232 • Fax: (510) 836-8910  
<https://www.ucpress.edu/>

**OFFICERS:** UC Press functions as a unit of the Office of the President, University of California. UC Press' Director is Alison Mudditt.

**ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIPS:** AAUP, AAP, ALPSP.

**UC PRESS AT A GLANCE:**

UC Press publishes book, journal, and digital content from an international author pool working both within and outside the academy.

Nonprofit publishing arm of the University of California system.

25% of UCP authors are affiliated with the University of California.

Publishes on average 200 new books and 33 multi-issue journals in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.

Maintains approximately 4,000 book titles in print.

**CORE MARKETS/CLIENTELE:** Faculty, students, and the librarians who serve them.

Readers interested in thoughtful debate about the vital social, cultural, political, and scientific issues of our times.

Policy makers, educators, and others who champion scholarly contributions to contemporary debates.

**NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 100

**NUMBER OF BOOKS PUBLISHED ANNUALLY:** 200

**NUMBER OF JOURNALS PUBLISHED ANNUALLY:** 33 multi-issue journals

**TOTAL NUMBER OF BOOKS ON YOUR BACKLIST:** approximately 4,000

**TOTAL NUMBER OF JOURNALS CURRENTLY PUBLISHED:** 33

**HISTORY AND BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF YOUR COMPANY/PUBLISHING PROGRAM:**

University of California Press is one of the most forward-thinking scholarly publishers in the nation. For more than 100 years, it has championed work that influences public discourse and challenges the status quo in multiple fields of study. At a time of dramatic change for publishing and scholarship, we collaborate with scholars, librarians, authors, and students to stay ahead of today's knowledge demands and shape the future of publishing.

**OUR MISSION:** To drive progressive change by seeking out and fostering the brightest minds and giving them voice and reach. 🌱

the model we have in mind, and the model is unlike anything available. The first stage will look at OA articles, and the second stage will look at OA books. Other areas we're exploring include location sensitive workflow apps to better integrate learning resources in the classroom setting. These projects are in their formative stages, so I can't tell you more about them now, but they align in their potential to scale, and in this you will find our digital focus.

**ATG:** *Can you talk a little more about the model you have in mind? How will your OA initiative make economic sense for UC Press?*

*What models will you use to ensure enough of an income stream to support your open access efforts for journal publications? And what about books and eBooks?*

**NBC:** Unfortunately, we're simply not yet ready to discuss in detail at this stage. You know, publishers argue endlessly over OA, but the only voices that really matter in the end are the choices of our customers. Our role is not to produce models that work for other publishers. Our role is to create models that work particularly well for our customers in the academy and for the press. 🌱