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ATG Interviews Yoav Lorch, Founder and CEO, Total Boox

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Founder and CEO, Total Boox

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

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

ATG: Yoav, your new *Total Boox* venture is based on a fascinating concept but why the name *Total Boox*? What's the reason/inspiration for the name?

YL: My original thought was to turn things around. To create books that are not permissive and forthcoming, always happy to open up and offer their treasures to anyone. I imagined a family of books that would unveil their secrets only under their own very specific and very demanding conditions. The plan was to use all the sensors available on smart phones and tablets to turn reading a book into an adventure, and the aspiring reader should gear up for a total experience that would take him places and make him do things he knows little about. There are many examples. Some portions of the book can only be read between 5:30 and 6:00 in the morning, while facing east; a chapter opens up only when you are sitting on a specific bench in a specific park; some parts can only be read backwards; some words are covered and are only revealed when you are moving at a speed of over 60 miles an hour, etc. In other words, if you wish to read the book you better obey it, and you may find yourself hopping up and down reciting a poem in Latin in order to be able to read the whole book. Maybe not a mass market product, but definitely a first.

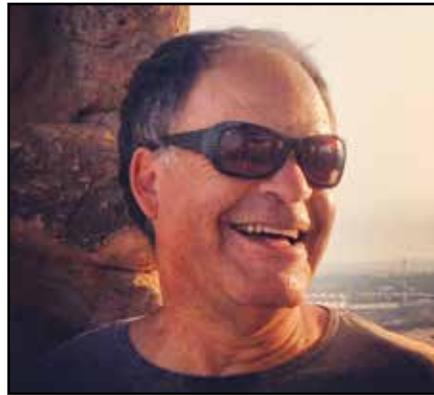
Total Boox started off as an attempt to make book reading a "total" experience. Hence the name.

As I was contemplating the right business model for this concept (should we reverse the charges as well, and simply penalize those who try to skip the hard parts?), it dawned on me that the whole business model used in eBooks is flawed from the core. Wrong, unnecessary and harmful.

Books are supposed to instigate reading. They have no value if they are not read. The need to purchase them prior to reading them was essential only since the "container," the pages and covers, and the massive organization needed to move the "containers" around, had real costs. But now these containers are gone, no transportation or warehousing is necessary. We can finally make availability a non-issue, and deploy the model of paying for value received. Paying for reading.

ATG: It appears that your original concept of creating "a family of books that would unveil their secrets only under their own very specific and very demanding conditions" is no longer part of the *Total Boox* model.

YL: Yes, you are right, the original concept for **Total Boox** was abandoned long ago. It just seemed so small and local in relation to the major revolution at hand.



ATG: After flirting with the idea of marketing *Total Boox* to individual readers you've decided to make libraries your primary market. What led to that decision?

YL: It started off in a chance meeting at **BEA**, and gradually I realized that the models by which eBooks are served to public libraries are absurd. When a book is a file, its inconceivable that if one person is reading the book, another one is denied it, and that a book is snatched away from you after a set time, regardless of your own volition. Add to that the high cost of digital books, and the need of librarians to "gamble," and guess beforehand what books their patrons would likely read. It seemed then, and seems today, that the value we bring to libraries is so substantial, that it makes sense to move the company in that direction.

That said, we are going against the grain of library routines, and defy much of the historical thinking in libraries.

- Librarians do not have to pick and choose. All our books are always available to all.
- Books move only one way. From the library to the patron. They never move back.
- When a patron checks out a book, he/she can keep it. It never goes away. Or as we like to phrase it: "Download them all. Keep them forever."
- The focus is on "reading" not on "lending." Circulation is a secondary parameter. We place value on "patron-engagement" and actual reading.
- Payment is based on the true value received by the community, and not on the purchasing decisions made by librarians. If books have not been checked out, or not been read, no money changes hands.

ATG: And it seems that public libraries are your main focus. Can you tell us which libraries are your biggest customers? Are there plans to expand into the academic library market?

YL: We have a very varied list of clients, from large to small, urban to rural, rich or poor, e.g., Westchester County Libraries in New York, San Jose and Palo Alto in California, Brazoria County in Texas, and the State Library of Kansas that bought the service for all its residents.

We have recently signed an agreement with the **Tocker Foundation** that focuses on helping small and rural libraries in Texas. They chose us to provide eBooks to twenty libraries, and each library will get our full collection, with a retail value of \$2.5 million, and all the benefits of our service. This is a big step towards closing the digital divide. A teenager in rural Texas will have access to a collection identical to a teenager in Palo Alto. We also help the accessibility issue since people without Internet access at home can load their devices with books when online, and keep reading when offline.

Our model makes a lot of sense in Academic libraries, and we would eventually address academic libraries as well.

ATG: Who do you see as your key competitors?

YL: In the library world we compete with the main eBook vendors. In the general market we compete with **Amazon**, **iBooks** and the such.

ATG: You call your model "incremental purchasing" and that it's not pay-per-use but more like purchase-as-you-read. They sound very similar, what is the difference?

YL: In the pay-per-use you are paying as you go along, but not creating any asset for yourself. In our model "what you read is what you own." That is, if you read a page and pay for it, next time you read the same page you are not charged. So if a patron checks out a cookbook, and uses only one recipe, but uses it often, the library is only charged for the first time. From then on the patron has the right to read the same recipe again and again free of charge.

ATG: *Total Boox* employs a concept called "crowd curating." Can you explain what that is? Are users required to participate and share their "reading shelves?"

YL: There are lots of books out there, and even more when our model is deployed. You need all the help you can get to discover the books that would truly engage you. So we built a system where anyone can create a short-list of

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books, per subject, per event, or just personal choices, and house that list in a “shelf.” Then any reader can simply add the whole shelf, with all the books in it, to their library, and readers build their personal library by adding quality collections others have created. These “shelves” created by specialists, librarians, readers, teachers or other, e.g., the State Library of Kansas is using a shelf called Happy Gardeners, with nine quality gardening books to promote gardening <http://kslib.info/128/Digital-Book-eLending>.

ATG: *You say that in order to charge the user fairly, and pay the publishers and authors fairly, your incremental purchasing model requires that you monitor what everyone is reading. That will raise some privacy red flags for librarians. Your response?*

YL: The issue of privacy is often raised by libraries, and rightly so. Reading is an intimate, revealing activity, and many people would not like others to know what they are reading. We take this issue very seriously in **Total Boox**, and all personal information is not accessible at all. True, in order to provide the service we have to monitor what people are reading. We need it in order to charge the libraries and pay the publishers fairly, and to maintain the quality of service. If a patron buys a new device the experience is seamless. We duplicate the full personal library, and also avoid charging for parts already paid for. We only provide librarians and publishers with aggregate information, e.g., the number of people reading a book, how much has been read, etc., and any personal information is totally blocked.

ATG: *Assuming that you can ensure privacy, you are still accumulating a lot of data and related information. What are your plans for its use? Will you sell it to other vendors? Use it to improve services to you readers?*

YL: We are not selling and will not sell any personal information to anyone. We are in the process of building a personal recommendation system based on the reading done by every reader, and the level of engagement that occurs between readers and books. Once fully deployed it will provide superior personal reading suggestions, that together with our friction-free immediate-availability approach will establish a new standard for the industry.

ATG: *You’ve said that “ownership” of eBooks has become an issue of some contention between publishers and libraries. How does Total Boox address that contention? Do libraries own, subscribe to, or license content from Total Boox? Or are we talking about something else entirely?*

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Yoav Lorch

BORN & LIVED: Born in Jerusalem Israel. Lived mostly in Israel, four years in the U.S., one year in the UK, and travelled around for three years.

FAMILY: One wife, three daughters.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: A writer originally, entrepreneur eventually
IN MY SPARE TIME: Sea Kayaking, Congas.

FAVORITE BOOKS: A mélange of **Simenon, Franzen** and **Marquez**.

PHILOSOPHY: Happiness is just around the corner.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Buying the containers, the books, in digital format will become almost obsolete, like buying music CD’s today. All people will have access to all books. People will read a lot, pay just for the portions they actively read, and books will fulfill their cultural, educational and other roles in the best possible way. 🐘

YL: In the digital sphere the meaning of “ownership” is very confusing. It actually relates to certain types of licenses. If you buy an eBook on Kindle you cannot give it or lend it. But you still own it. If a library buys an eBook from a publisher they’d call it “ownership” just because the publisher doesn’t have the right to take it back, but still the library has to abide with “one-user-one-copy” etc. It is within reason to call “ownership” a situation where you are free to use something exactly the way you want to, and there are no limitations on how and when you can use it. In that sense the full catalog we provide libraries, now about 100,000 titles, is actually owned by the library, since the library can provide it to all its patrons, with no one-user-one-copy or any other limitation. Moreover, the books never disappear from the patrons’ devices which adds to the notion of “ownership.”

In our dialog with libraries we avoid the term “ownership” as it is far too unclear. We provide the service on an annual basis to the library, and the libraries can choose between two different modes. Many libraries fear that with our model patrons will read “through the roof,” and they will end up going over budget. For these libraries we provide a cap, and take the risk of “reading through the roof” on ourselves. With other libraries we just bill them monthly for the reading done by their patrons.

It’s important to note that paying for reading is extremely cost effective, and in general the cost of reading is only a small fraction of the price of the full collection.

ATG: *How are publishers and authors reacting to your concept? How many books are currently available in Total Boox? How many publishers are represented? Are any of the “Big Five” participating yet?*

YL: Publishers feel they are not realizing their full potential with libraries. They look at their extensive lists of books, and notice that not more than 5% of the eBooks they can

offer are ever bought by libraries, as libraries tend to spend most of their eBook budgets on a limited number of expensive best-sellers. So the publishers see us as a unique and potent channel for exposing their full lists to patrons, and providing the chance to be discovered and read to each and every title on offer.

Total Boox has around 100,000 titles, coming from over 250 publishers, and covering a very diverse array of subjects. We grow the content through a live dialog with librarians, and try to supply the types of books librarians feel the communities are interested in. At the moment we work only with established publishers, among them some well known names as **Workman, O’Reilly, Sourcebooks, Elsevier, Oxford University Press, F+W Media, Hay House Publications**, and many, many more.

We are in constant discussion with one or the other of the big five, and they eye us with great interest. It’s difficult to guess which one will be the first to work with us.

ATG: *How do you determine the pricing for your purchase-as-you-read model? If a library is interested in Total Boox, what will it cost them? Can you tell us how many libraries currently have Total Boox?*

YL: We do a wise guesstimate of what the library’s patrons will be reading in a year. Its based on the number of active card holders, the current number of “digitarians” (patrons actively reading eBooks) and on our experience with other libraries. Its always a surprisingly low figure given the breadth of our selection and the freedom of use. We then cap the library’s expense at this amount, and if patrons read over that it’s our problem, and we pay the publishers for the extra reading done.

ATG: *Being the driving force behind an innovative start up like Total Boox must be exciting, but also draining. How do you recharge your batteries? What fun activities*

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do you enjoy? And of course, we'd love to know what books you are reading.

YL: I have a built-in trust in the generosity of destiny. An engrained belief that things will turn out alright no matter what. Even when I have reason to challenge this belief, I can't really shake it off. I don't know who to thank for this trait, but I guess it's here to stay. And when you add to this the full conviction that what we are doing is both viable and good, that the books of the world and the people of the world desperately need a better platform for finding and engaging each other, it's a very potent energy source.

There is no shortage of hardships on this way. As you can imagine libraries are not quick to embrace newcomers, especially those branded "vendors." On the other hand we often receive such warm and heartfelt thanks from patrons and librarians, that it quickly balances the suspicious glances we get elsewhere.

I love the sea and my sea-kayak, and I go out in almost all weather, day and night. It's a dance with the wind and the waves, and has on the mind the effect of reformatting the hard disk. When I'm back on shore there's a bit more order in my mind, and the priorities, both practical and philosophical, are more correctly placed.

I read mostly literary fiction, both new and old, but I can get easily immersed in more or less anything. In fact, Total Boox has greatly increased the subjects and types of books I've dabbled in, and recently I read some military history, and an extremely effective diet book. 🌿

against the grain
people profile

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Alex Holzman

BORN & LIVED: Born in New York City. Have lived in NYC; Bergenfield, NJ; New Brunswick, NJ; Berkeley, CA; Columbus, OH; Brooklyn, NY; Philadelphia, PA.

EARLY LIFE: Fun. 5.5 people (an interesting story) in a two-bedroom, rent-controlled NYC apartment, with the life-changing **American Museum of Natural History** and **Hayden Planetarium** and Central Park only a block away. Followed by a whole house (!) and lots of woods and fields to roam in NJ.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: College textbook sales rep/manager, abstracter/indexer, acquiring editor, electronic publishing manager, consortia sales manager, university press director, freelance baseball writer, journal editor.

FAMILY: Lots of fun and lots of love.

IN MY SPARE TIME: What's that? But non-professional activities include bicycles, running, walking, traveling, and learning sabmetrics.

FAVORITE BOOKS: Biographies and baseball books and novels and creative nonfiction. *The Essays of E.B. White* is the book I re-read and re-read and re-read.

PET PEEVES: So much to do; so little time!

PHILOSOPHY: 1) I'd rather be lucky than good. 2) Luck is the residue of design. 3) Don't look back — something might be gaining on you.

MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Publishing so many important books written by such great authors.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Taking my great nieces to their first baseball game; continuing to contribute in various ways to improving the scholarly communications ecosystem, especially its sustainability.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: I'll assume this means university presses. I worry that some may cease to exist because of the changing structure of scholarly communication, but I hope those that persist will be using multiple business models to thrive in their niches. I don't presume to know what models; the excitement will be in seeing and perhaps helping them to develop! 🌿

NEW: Charleston
Conference to Reward
Creative Ideas!

In 2015, the **Charleston Conference** presented several well-received panels about startups, innovation, and entrepreneurship. For 2016, the Conference will seek to expand on those themes and that spirit by actively encouraging creative solutions in academic libraries. In an exciting new and experimental session called **CHARLESTON FAST PITCH**, 3-5 applicants, thoughtfully pre-selected from among all those who respond to a CALL (soon to be issued), will "pitch" their ideas to the entire audience and a select group of judges. TWO proposals will be awarded, one by the judges and one from audience votes. This Call will be open to all who have interesting, useful, and implementable ideas for change and improvement in their own workplaces and seek a community "vote of confidence" plus a small financial award (\$2500 each) to seed their proposals. Immense thanks to **Steve Goodall** and the **Goodall Family Foundation** for funding the 2016 prizes in this new **Charleston Conference** Feature. For further information, contact **Ann Okerson** <aokerson@gmail.com> or **Katina Strauch** <kstrauch@comcast.net>. 🌿

Rumors
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optimize legal research, drafting and review processes. By layering **Lexis Search Advantage** capabilities on top of their **BA Insight** knowledge management systems, law firms open up access to the full capabilities and content of **LexisNexis** research solutions — reaping significant efficiency and quality benefits.

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I want to give a big shout out to **Danny Overstreet** who recently visited the **College of Charleston Library** to discuss the usage of our collection by our faculty members. He was of course touting **Emerald** products but his spreadsheets and manipulation of what was generally being used (no confidential patron information) was excellent. This in my opinion is what we librarians should be doing to promote use of our many resources. Yes, I know it takes time and there are too few of us but there may be an opportunity here.

Don Beagle, Director, just sent a brochure about the renovation and upgrade of the **Abbot Vincent Taylor Library** at **Belmont Abbey College**. Check it out here. And **Don** has agreed to write a regular column for **ATG**. Coming soon.

<http://www.catholicnewsherald.com/42-news/rokstories/8308-belmont-abbey-college-library-renovation-recaptures-gothic-architecture>

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