ATG Interviews Nigel Newton, Founder and Chief Executive of Bloomsbury Publishing

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Founder and Chief Executive of Bloomsbury Publishing

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ATG: Mr. Newton, what was it about a career in publishing that attracted you? When you founded Bloomsbury in 1986, what factors led you to think it was the right time to establish a new publishing house? What did you see that perhaps others did not?

NN: Publishing was irresistible to me because it was about books. 1986 seemed a good moment to start **Bloomsbury** because the publishing industry was having one of its periodic fits of conglomeration as companies rushed to buy each other over. It felt to me that there was an opportunity for a new medium sized independent publisher of quality. It was also a good time for me as I was approaching 30 and I thought I'd better get on with it. The opportunity I saw was that some staff and some authors were more inspired by the human scale of a medium sized publisher than by a large one and that everyone was inspired by great books as opposed to OK books.

ATG: How did you envision Bloomsbury separating itself from the established publishers of the time? What was unique about your concept for Bloomsbury? Were there innovative changes that you planned to bring to the industry?

NN: The mission of **Bloomsbury** from the start and to this day was to be a publisher of works of excellence and originality. This set us apart from the commercial publishing houses, though it put us in direct competition with smaller firms of quality and the literary imprints within conglomerates. One thing that was unique about **Bloomsbury** was the sense of style which my colleagues **Liz Calder**, **David Reynolds**, and **Alan Wherry** brought to how we published books.

Firstly, there was the design of our books with reading ribbons in every novel, head and tail bands, wide flaps, putting the word **Bloomsbury** on the front of every book, and our wonderful logo of **Diana**, Roman Goddess of Hunting, as she hunted in the form of searching for the best authors of our time.

We courted the book trade and literary press with amazing author dinners that **Liz Calder**, **Salman Rushdie's** editor at **Jonathan Cape** before she joined us, had a gift of throwing together. We were good at parties, too, and took our staff and authors to sales conferences in places like Berlin, Versailles and Venice. I remember first meeting **Khaled Hosseini** when he came as an unknown writer to our sales conference in Eastbourne on the British coast.

We also put 5% of the equity of the company aside in the **Bloomsbury Author's Trust** to be divided up among our future authors when we floated the company in an IPO on the **London Stock Exchange** in 1994. This extra financial

reward was popular with authors and attracted considerable press attention.

ATG: Can you tell us about the early years? What major challenges did you face? How did you and the company meet those challenges?

NN: They were tremendous fun. Because **British Telecom** took 12 weeks to connect a new phone in 1986, we rented a new-fangled thing called a car phone, the predecessor of cell phones. It had a huge battery — the size of a car battery — and a full handset like a landline with a spiral cord. The 12 or so of us in our first year stood in an orderly line to use that one phone to phone our authors including **Margaret Atwood**, **David Guterson** and **Scott Turow**.

Another challenge about 11 years out was our bank. I can, on application, advise any budding publishing entrepreneurs which British high street bank to avoid. Their successors were marvellous and took over the “**Gringotts** phenomenon” as the originating publisher of **Harry Potter** which had already started when we left the last bank.

ATG: In another interview you said that the success of **Harry Potter** and the **Philosopher's Stone** led to the start of **Bloomsbury in America** and also allowed investment in the new area of academic and professional publishing. Can you tell us more about those two ventures?

NN: I worried that territorial copyright would not be respected by internet retailers and feared U.S. editions of **Bloomsbury** books flooding the U.K. market. I thought we better have our own U.S. editions so that wouldn't happen. **John Sargent** at **Macmillan USA** was tremendously helpful in providing sales, distribution and advice as my colleagues **Alan Wherry** and **Lisa Gallagher** set up **Bloomsbury USA** in the Flatiron Building in Manhattan. In fact, I was wrong and internet retailers have respected territorial copyright in the main.

But it's great having 100 Bloomsbury personnel at 1385 Broadway publishing great authors like **Sarah J. Maas** and **Johan Hari**. We have had three *New York Times* bestsellers so far this year.

Regarding our entry into academic and professional publishing, we saw a tremendous opportunity to balance the volatile bestseller-oriented **Bloomsbury** trade frontlist with the steadier characteristics of high-quality publishing in the humanities and social sciences. It has worked brilliantly for **Bloomsbury**. **Jonathan Glasspool** and his **Bloomsbury Academic** colleagues worldwide have created through ten acquisitions and organic growth one of the finest academic publishers in the world in only a decade. And the opportunity our now huge and high-quality academic back catalogue has created in digital resources has been exceptional.

ATG: After taking the plunge into the academic and professional market what surprised you the most? Were there instances where things didn't work out as you anticipated?

NN: One of the most surprising discoveries I have made is just how much pressure there is on librarians to work to exceedingly tight budgets, and to balance so many competing priorities. Our products compete with STEM subjects for budget but seeing the impact of this on decision-making is sobering. It's reassuring to see so much interest in and enthusiasm for the subjects we publish in, and I hope that the arts, humanities, and social sciences receive the support they need because they are vital for civilized society, now more than ever.

ATG: Evidently, the move into the academic and professional market has been a success. **Bloomsbury reported 13% growth in academic revenue in early 2019**. To what do you attribute your success? What have been your proudest achievements in this area? Have there been any disappointments?

NN: Shrewd acquisitions, excellence of the publishing programs of those acquisitions, and hiring or inheriting great colleagues helped maintain that excellence as **Bloomsbury** absorbed different presses into our own academic program.

Proudest moments: **Berg**, as the first acquisition and the originating publisher of the **Dartmouth-winning Berg Fashion Library**; **Continuum** as our largest acquisition, and the acquisition of **Hart**, which has a superb reputation for the quality of its legal publishing; also the launch of **Bloomsbury Digital Resources** which realizes a dream of having a division that makes our academic publishing so much more discoverable through digital technologies, thereby serving the global community of students, researchers, librarians, and authors.

ATG: Speaking of **Bloomsbury Digital Resources**, could you expand on that bit? What

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were the drivers behind a digital only division and how did you see Bloomsbury differentiating itself from publishers that were already established in this space?

NN: We want to provide content in ways that are innovative, not for the sake of innovation itself, but where it provides a real benefit to the user. Digital resources are clearly the best way of achieving that aim and, as online products are entirely different beasts from print, it made good sense to establish a division that is fully focused and attuned to the special needs of libraries; and also to the development and evolution of digital resources that meet the needs of their users. A great example of this comes from one of our flagship products, **Drama Online**, which has a tool that enables students to locate monologues that meet very specific requirements for actors, in addition to supplying landmark works, such as the **Arden Shakespeare** and **Methuen Drama** texts.

Our new products must meet very specific criteria, the first being that they must fill a gap or offer something unique. A good example is **Screen Studies**, where we've heard repeatedly that screenplays are actually quite hard to come by in the institutional market. Another, of course, is **Bloomsbury Fashion Central** where the component products cover fashion, costume, and textiles in a way that is unprecedented and serving what is a relatively new but growing discipline.

We're also very interested in experimenting with offering textbooks online and we've seen tremendous early success with **Bloomsbury Applied Visual Arts**, a textbook platform that responds to the needs of visual learners, not only in terms of content, but also how that content is rendered — with lots of images, visual cues, and less text. We're also offering **Fairchild Books Library** now in the U.S. We acquired **Fairchild Books**, the market leader for fashion textbooks, in 2012 and it has performed strongly for us, but the challenges students face when acquiring learning materials are well documented. This project enables libraries to supply these core texts on a subscription model that should generate high usage while also supporting their student constituency and aligning with textbook affordability mandates.

We're fortunate that a lot of librarians get what we're trying to do with our range of digital resources and much of the feedback has been extraordinarily positive; and when it isn't, we listen and we fix what needs fixing. There hasn't been too much of that, fortunately, but you've got to be flexible, especially with the various kinds of pressures being placed on libraries now, with budget being only one of many. And any librarian reading this who doesn't already subscribe to **Drama Online** should do so now! It's great — users love it — and we're very proud of it.

***ATG:** Although you publish numerous digital products, Bloomsbury still seems very much committed to print. Do you see that remaining true for the foreseeable future? Do you think digital and print co-exist in the long term?*

NN: I do, in fact, see us committed to print. We know from conducting focus groups and our ongoing conversations with librarians, faculty, and students that print, particularly in the humanities, is still very much in demand. What we've heard repeatedly — and this seems to be very much in line with our peers — is that students enjoy the ease of search and discoverability of electronic resources but then often request print for more immersive reading. And maybe the greatest surprise here is that that is just as true of those matriculating now, the so-called born digital generation, as it is for those who preceded them. So there is clearly something inherently "human" about the print format that seems more nature than nurture. As someone who has always loved the printed book, I find that comforting.

***ATG:** There has also been some concern expressed about the viability of the scholarly monograph going forward. From your experience in the academic market, do you share those concerns? Why or why not?*

NN: While it's true we've all been bemoaning the death of the monograph for several decades now, I believe it's viable — at least in the medium term — for two reasons: the first is that I think as long as there is research being conducted within a given discipline there is going to be some format for communicating that scholarship. For the foreseeable future, that format is the monograph, whether in print or digital. The second reason harkens back to your question about the revenue growth of **Bloomsbury Academic**. One piece of that growth happens to come from monograph publishing and **Bloomsbury Collections**, our eBook platform which hosts a large number of monographs, has actually seen tremendous growth over the past five years. And that's not coming only from emerging markets such as China, it's a global trend. That speaks to the continued resilience of the monograph as a format, whether acquired as part of a collection module or at the individual title level, as well as the quality of the content we're publishing.

***ATG:** We notice that you have new content partnerships with Taylor and Francis and Human Kinetics, a leading sports science publisher. Can you tell us about those arrangements?*

NN: We try to be as innovative as possible and partnerships often make the most sense to get unique content. We already work with **Faber** on **Drama Online** and **Screen Studies** and with the **Royal Institute of British Architects** on **Bloomsbury Architecture Library**. Partnerships are very much in line with the way we approach the business generally and we see great benefit from continuing down that path.

Our collaboration with **T&F** will draw on their extensive academic content for subject-specific digital hubs that will be created by **Bloomsbury**. The idea being that we can create digital products in areas where we share strengths and where working together makes for the most compelling value proposition from the point of view of both librarians and end users. Within **Bloomsbury**, and within **Digital Resources** in particular, we have a broad range of partnerships and it's often more sensible to view competitors as opportunities rather than threats.

The objective is always to provide great content that is easily discoverable and meets research needs — that's the entire goal at the end of the day and why we do what we do.

With **Human Kinetics**, we work in a different way as we don't actually publish academic titles in their subject area. **HK** are without doubt the market leader in educational sport and physical activity titles. They have the content, but we have the technology, sales and marketing solution, which should be a perfect marriage. We are uniquely placed in our ability to offer not only a technology solution, but also access to the market, which many partners would struggle to reach. What's especially fantastic about **HK** is that this content has never previously been available to libraries in this format: it's not only text and images but they have great video content that enhances and augments the text in a way that is simply not possible with print.

***ATG:** It seems that expansion has always been part of your publishing strategy. Do you have any future expansion plans that you can share, especially in the area of academic and professional publishing?*

NN: We'll continue to expand through acquisition as well as organically. What we're looking for is the quality of the publishing program. Our acquisitions always have a singular focus that is highly regarded and has been recognized by the market: for example, **IB Tauris** with Middle East Studies.

But we've also recently expanded to provide sales and marketing services to other publishers seeking access to the markets that our global teams can provide. Earlier this year we began representing the proprietary eBook platforms of both **Rowman & Littlefield** (Select Collections) and **Manchester University Press** (*manchesterhive*). And, as noted earlier, we're also now able to provide white label services so that's another form of expanding our footprint in the academic sphere.

***ATG:** Before we end, we have to ask, how important are libraries in Bloomsbury's marketing strategy? Do you see libraries continuing to be a relevant as you plan Bloomsbury's future?*

NN: Absolutely. We're deeply committed to serving the needs of libraries not just in the near term but for the long haul. Print of course will continue to be a core component of our publishing program and that still represents the majority format of our sales to the library market. But our digital resources have grown in the double digits during the past couple of years and we see that growth continuing. Given that digital products are living things, you can't grow and evolve them as required unless you're deeply committed to investing in the ongoing needs of libraries. We have a librarian on staff, for example, who is responsible for the enormous amount of work involved in ensuring that our metadata is meeting the needs of libraries. And we have a library advisory board from whom we seek advice.

I sit on the advisory board of the library of **Cambridge University** (my alma mater) so I'm in touch with the issues that libraries currently face. While **Cambridge** is one of the larger

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to be done for journals in HSS, and this model is really promising.

ATG: *From a broader perspective, what should we be looking for from OA publishing? How do you see it evolving in the next few years?*

SF: We need to focus more on the researcher! The OA space had to work out the internal relationship between those involved in the publication process, and a lot has been achieved. But now we need to shift the attention back to those we are doing this for: researchers in their daily work.

I am pleased to see that more and more libraries and publishers support open access in tangible ways, and my impression is that there is no decrease in their willingness to experiment. We expect this to be a stable pattern. One question mark for me is the likely impact of a cooling world economy on library budgets, particularly more innovative things like open access. I am confident that many libraries and publishers have made OA a core element of their mission and will therefore continue to expand their support. But librarians will have to make hard choices, and we need to support them with our work in the best possible way.

ATG: *It sounds like you think both OA and Knowledge Unlatched are sustainable in the long term. Aside from decreasing library budgets, do you see any other threats to either OA's or KU's viability? And you note that librarians will have to make hard choices. What hard choices do you mean? Will publishers have to make similar hard choices?*

SF: The hardest choice on the library side, it seems to me, is that librarians have to consider canceling the Big Deals. That is not necessarily something that is negative for them, but spending budgets in smaller increments requires much more knowhow and work. Going down this avenue means to devote more resources, and that is simply not possible in many institutions, if libraries lack the backing from above.

The vast majority of publishers seems willing to publish OA. They understand that it is important to many authors and almost all funders and customers. At a certain point, they will have to adapt their organizations to a changing landscape. There are still publishers today that invest in more institutional sales force. I doubt this is a good idea. But I am not worried about publishers. When it comes to digitizing their content and testing business models, they have proven they can adapt quickly.

ATG: *Sven, thanks so much. We really appreciate you agreeing to do this interview. We've learned a lot.* 🌿

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libraries globally, it isn't immune to the broad changes taking place that are having an impact on the ways that libraries and librarians function.

And I hope you won't mind if I plug the fact that we have annually offered a travel scholarship to the **Charleston Conference** for early career librarians in the humanities. So we work with and invest in libraries and librarians in a number of ways.

ATG: *One final question, we always wonder how busy executives get re-energized and ready for the next challenge. Are there any activities or hobbies that you turn to for relaxation and fun?*

NN: Well, er, um, reading. And walking and music, the gym, and my family. Holidays are good and whoever invented the weekend was a genius.

ATG: *Mr. Newton we are delighted that you were able to take time out of a very busy schedule to talk to us. Thank you so much!* 🌿