



# Beyond the Book<sup>®</sup>



KENNEALLY: What I'd like to do next though is turn to someone who really has a different perspective, one very much tied to books but very much also looking ahead to the future. And that's Ana Maria Alessi who was named publisher of HarperMedia in March 2005. She first joined HarperCollins Publishers in 2001 and now oversees publication of all adult and children's audio titles and all HarperCollins e-books. For HarperCollins Audio she's published many classic children's books, including Laura Ingalls Wilder and C.S. Lewis and many frontlist authors including Lemony Snicket and Jamie Lee Curtis. There was a recent announcement which you may have read about where Harper is now – has its own Internet TV studio in its offices in New York and that was what caught my eye. And so I guess my first question, Ana Marie – and first, welcome.

ALLESSI: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

KENNEALLY: Very nice to have you here. My first question is what's going on at Harper? I thought you guys were book publishers.

ALLESSI: Well we are author publishers. The way that I try to communicate what we're collectively trying to do is that in my opinion we're trying to talk about authors as much as we talk about books. And that is a subtle but important distinction. And all of our efforts are moving towards putting an author in front of a consumer so that, to use Paul's reference, why didn't somebody tell me about this great book when I was 16 instead of 25, what we're trying to do is make sure that those books and those authors are out there and in front of potential consumers because there is a lot of distractions, potential distractions. And a lot of our job is to make sure that a consumer knows that there's a new publication and that they would be interested in reading it for some very good reasons.

KENNEALLY: How do your authors respond to that? The classic picture of the author is alone a room with his typewriter or number-two pencil. And here you're really encouraging them to come out of their studio and into the real world.

ALLESSI: Well authors want to be read and that's where we start the conversation. We want to go find as many readers as possible for you and here is a menu of all of our different efforts and it involves people all across different departments. And we see that obviously as the end goal is to have more readership – or listenership – and they appreciate it very much. And they're a tremendously enthusiastic and happy to partner with us. We are approaching them in a much more collaborative way now and saying this is what our expertise is, this is how we think we can contribute to your efforts and here is a road map that we've put together and what can you do? And basically they say we'll do pretty much whatever you want us to do because it will lead to more readers.

KENNEALLY: Now your Internet TV studio has only been open for a short time so it's hard to draw any really substantive conclusions but what kind of activities have been going on and has it been just book promotion or more than that?

ALLESSI: It currently has only been book promotion. It's been up for about 30 days and we've had nearly 35 authors in. We are using it to spread the word of what they're doing, whether it's a current publication or a future publication or in the case of Simon Winchester, to come in and comment on current events. We talk about how it's modeled after a newsroom environment and that is because we hope to be able to pull people in and get the video posted very quickly to take advantage of anything that might be happening in the news or any publicity opportunities. And it's gone very well. We have a tremendously talented producer but she hasn't had to work too hard because when you ask an author to talk about their work, it's usually pretty darn fascinating. They have great stories to tell about how they came to this project and what the result of their effort was.

KENNEALLY: And Paul talks a great deal about the conversation that books and authors have with readers and here it seems to me you're encouraging that kind of conversation and the way that people correspond or interact with others today is increasing through the Internet so if you were to record that, presumably you could have something up this afternoon about a response to the earthquake in China if you had someone who was an expert in that.

ALLESSI: Like Simon Winchester.

KENNEALLY: Absolutely.

ALLESSI: His new book is about China. So absolutely.

KENNEALLY: And where does that put Harper in the picture? Increasingly the media, which was the gateway to news, publicity, is receding because you can go directly to the Web. Is that something you're banking on, you can get directly to the individual?

ALLESSI: Yes. A lot of what we do at Harper is to try to bring efforts in-house and do things ourselves. And this is another example of that. For a variety of reasons we think that that makes a strong approach. And yes, absolutely. So now we can create the product and we can be effective in placing it in a variety of ways. We give it back to the marketing and direct marketing and publicity departments and they tailor its placement for each individual author and book.

KENNEALLY: It strikes me that that's also ensuring the future of publishing in a way, if we're talking about the future of reading here. The publisher has to continue to have a valuable role in this because otherwise it could just be author direct to reader. I'm not saying that that's bad, necessarily, but if publishers want to stay in business they need to find ways to add value to the equation.

ALLESSI: Yes. And we do think that we can add a bit of expertise, whether it's shooting the video or recording the audiobook or placing an interview. We talk about how we don't ask authors to design their book covers so we want to be full service in terms of marketing and publicity and a wide variety of business models and formats. Our job is to promote any idea that the author has. So these are a variety of ways that we're doing it.

KENNEALLY: And your own background, your own professional background is interesting because you came to Harper not from the world of what you told me was bound books. And I found that an interesting phrase, books unbound – but also books unbundled or the unbundling of the content, if you will.

ALLESSI: Right. I'm not a traditional publishing person. I started at Harper six years ago in the audio department as an editor and I've never had a book job. I love authors. I love books obviously but I also – I really do believe that there are a variety of ways that an author can get his or her idea to the world. And I'm very excited to be part of that effort to get the idea to the world in any format that is successful in reaching people.

KENNEALLY: Well here at Book Expo there's been a great deal of attention to the e-book and the Kindle and so forth. And the response, it was interesting to me – the most interesting response was somebody, a man who often has his eye on the future, Steve –

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ALLESSI: – by saying I don't really believe what Steve Jobs says publicly and I think that it in fact encouraged me that it's more likely that he's working on a delivery system for book interiors than every before and I have a little – so I'm very skeptical.

KENNEALLY: Well I think the future of books is tied up in the past and I just have to share a short story. I met recently a publisher of Latin and Greek textbooks. And so I asked him what's new in dead languages these days. And what he told me was they were doing a podcast series of Cicero and Caesar and so forth and the pod –

ALLESSI: That's fantastic.

KENNEALLY: Yeah. And the podcast series is called "I, Podius" which I thought was terrific.

ALLESSI: You got to love that. That's fantastic. It's anything that we can do to put the words and the ideas in front of potential consumers I think is a good effort and I think that I'm encouraged as well. I think people are going to read. I think they're going to read in different ways and I do think that reading bound books is likely to diminish and probably reading long formats is likely to diminish but I'm not – I don't think it's going to diminish hugely and I'm not discouraged that ideas are going to suffer. In fact I think ideas will probably gain in currency as we have more opportunity to run into them.

KENNEALLY: Well we're going to start thinking this is all just a group hug but I'm glad to hear it because we certainly know that the future of the newspaper seems to be very much

in doubt and printed forms of all kinds really are under threat. But there is a sense that the book is an object that will survive all of this. Thank you very much, Ana Maria.

ALLESSI: Thank you.