



JOHN BLOSSOM Author of “CONTENT NATION”

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KENNEALLY: Good day. We are pledging allegiance to Content Nation here at *Beyond the Book*, and joining us is the author of a book that explores all the new ways that social media are changing our lives professionally and personally.

Joining us is John Blossom, the author of *Content Nation*, who is one of the most widely recognized content industry analysts out there. He is the founder of Shore Communications, is the author of the book *Content Nation: Surviving and Thriving as Social Media Changes our Work, our Lives and our Future*, and he's a frequent speaker at industry and corporate events around the world, really, in U.S., Europe and Asia. John, welcome to *Beyond the Book*.

BLOSSOM: Thanks very much, Chris. It's a pleasure to be speaking with you today.

KENNEALLY: We're very happy to have you here, John, and looking forward to getting into the book, *Content Nation*, and a bit about what you mean by that fabulous little phrase. I know when we met a couple of months ago, you gave me a flag, so we want people to know that when we say that we're pledging allegiance here, there really is a flag of Content Nation, and maybe you could tell us just what is the emblem on that flag? I'm looking at it, but people can't see what I see, so tell them.

BLOSSOM: That's true. If you're going to our website, contentnation.com, or you've met me at an event and you said, what's that lapel pin you have? You've seen the little logo there that has a picture of the Earth and a picture of a quill pen in front of it, and we say in *Content Nation* that the world is a nation of publishers and that people have, through social media publishing tools, learned to think of themselves as citizens of the Content Nation.

What that really means is that people now think of themselves as publishers in ways that they really hadn't before the Web and the new generation of publishing tools that make it so easy for everyone to publish came along.



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KENNEALLY: Well, explain what that means, really. I might think of myself as an author, but why is it different – because I might write in a blog or I might contribute to something like Twitter or whatever. But why do I need to likewise think of myself as a publisher?

BLOSSOM: Because in fact, you are. If you sent an e-mail to a group of people, you're a publisher. If you make a comment on a forum or a weblog or a product review site, you are publishing. You are using tools to communicate with audiences, and in doing so, you really have ultimately the same goals as other people who have been officially called publishers all these years. So the tools are there to allow anybody who does that to reach a global audience.

KENNEALLY: Well, that is the incredible piece of that, the Internet, that still sometimes smacks me across the head. The power of the networked computer that really does put the world at your fingertips, literally and figuratively.

But there's something though that I think you're trying to say that's really serious here. It's one thing to contribute to an online forum or to post a comment on a website or do that sort of thing, but publishing – I'm going to think of it in its traditional sense. Publishing has a serious aspect to it, has a kind of formal piece to it, and that's what you're trying to drive us all towards, right, to take this seriously. It's not just an offhand comment that we're all making. We really are contributing to something much larger, more important than that.

BLOSSOM: Absolutely, because what we do influences people, and sometimes we're conscious of that influence. Other times, we're not.

But what began to get me really thinking about this concept of Content Nation was when I started to look at market research. We know, for example, that there are over a billion people today – now about 1.4 billion people – who have access to the Internet, and that sounds like it's a big number.

I started looking though at some research from various places including Pew Internet Life, that began to look at, well, how are people really using these personal publishing tools? What are their motivations?

And one of the statistics that came out of their study was that there's a significant percentage of people who are using weblogs to try to influence other people. And I started extrapolating their data into other data that's available on global usage of the Internet for various things and I began to realize that there were tens of millions of people who really seriously wanted to influence other people through their social media publishing.



And you begin to scale it up, and depending on what group of people you call social media publishers, it could be as many as live in the nation of Turkey, over 20 million people who consider themselves seriously trying to influence other people around the world. So just looking at the core of people out of that billion people – billion-plus people who are using the Internet – you have truly a nation-size group of people who are trying to influence the world.

And we know, for example, that there certainly aren't 20-plus million authors of books or writers on newspapers and so on. So the scale and breadth of people who think of social media as an influential mechanism is truly staggering today.

KENNEALLY: You call it Content Nation, and again, content can cover a multitude of sins, John. But you defined it in a way that I thought was very helpful, because we hear phrases like – it used to be we were all readers, John, and now we're content consumers. It's a kind of a clunkiness to that expression.

But you've defined content in a way that I thought was really important and very helpful and very succinct. So define content for us and explain what you mean by that definition.

BLOSSOM: Sure thing. I've used slightly different phrases in different circumstances, but in a nutshell, content is more than just the stuff. People have a hard time figuring out what that word really means sometimes. I think of it as the information and experiences created by people that add value to audiences in contexts that they value.

In other words, we may produce something and we may not necessarily think that it's valuable. But an audience in a particular context, they may find it value, and that's what makes our information and experiences important.

For example, there was a video clip years ago that was put online of a little kid outside of – a teenage kid outside of Montreal, Quebec, and he was making little gyrations with a broomstick and pretending that he was Darth Vader in *Star Wars*.

KENNEALLY: We've all seen that, I think.

BLOSSOM: It's called *Star Wars Kid*. And *Star Wars Kid* all of a sudden was put up by some friends who basically wanted to pull a prank on this kid, but it was seen by millions of people within weeks. All of a sudden, something that just seemed like somebody playing in a video lab became a worldwide experience, and it was in a context that people valued because they were able to share it with other people rapidly and to comment on it and so on.

So content, if you will, is the a-ha when an audience discovers what we've been doing and finds it to be very useful.



KENNEALLY: It's funny, too, John, because the usefulness there is multifaceted. I was thinking one aspect of this, which is rather simple and almost mundane, is we might contribute to Yelp a review of a local restaurant. That has value because if I'm thinking about going out with the family, I want to see what other people thought of that new place and it's good to hear that. So even just what essentially is a kind of an on-the-fly review becomes really valuable because if there are 10 such like it, then probably 10 people aren't wrong – it is a good restaurant.

BLOSSOM: Absolutely.

KENNEALLY: And then value can then likewise be a number of people – I'm now addicted to the comment section for the local newspaper, the *Boston Globe*, because you really do find out what your fellow citizens are thinking about a certain topic, good or bad. And there's a value that I place in knowing what my neighbors are thinking about something.

BLOSSOM: Sure thing. And there's this concept of scalability that adds to that as well using today's publishing tools. A lot of what you just mentioned, Chris, we've done for years in America and other nations. It used to be back in the 19th century and earlier in the 20th century, folks in small towns would go down to the general store, sit around the cracker barrel or the potbelly stove and chat about things.

Well, in today's society, that's a lot harder to do. With social media tools, we can do that a lot more easily on the Internet, and more to the point, we can find specific groups of people with similar interests much more easily that help us add value to one another through our insights than ever before.

One of the most germane examples of that right now is what's happening in the nation of Iran where there's been quite a bit of turmoil in the wake of their recent election. All of a sudden, out of the blue, when things began to look like there was foul play in the elections, people in that nation started communicating things using Twitter and Facebook and other social media publishing tools, and almost instantaneously, people around the world became aware of what was happening in that nation at the street level through individuals deciding to become citizens of Content Nation and to be able to tell people what was happening in that nation.

And before you know it, the people of the world, just through their little individual contributions, began to create global awareness of a major political situation. So it can scale anywhere from the local restaurant to our local politics to global politics and beyond.

KENNEALLY: And it's about community, John. Others have noticed that. But what I was thinking as I was hearing you describe the situation in Iran, it must have mattered to the



people in Tehran that others, not only in their own country but around the world, cared about what was happening there. It's one thing to express your opinion, but to then have a kind of instant feedback, and feedback in a kind of loop so that you're continuing to see that feedback evolve. To know that there were millions of people who cared, who supported them in their goals, that surely made a difference to them.

BLOSSOM: Oh, absolutely. And that kind of underscores the nation part of Content Nation.

As I mention in the book, it's not necessarily that people's passports have changed, but when you enter that mode of thinking of yourself as somebody who has the power to communicate with the world and to create a global affinity group on any given topic, all of a sudden, there's something about you as a person that changes and you have allegiances and bonds with people that are beyond the bonds of a mere product and to some degree, even beyond nationhood itself. This idea that we are, as human beings, united by publishing on a peer-to-peer basis, changes a lot of fundamental things in how we can organize as a society.

KENNEALLY: Again, another thought occurs to me where I'm speaking to you, John, from Boston, not very far from Cambridge and the home of Bolt, Beranek and Newman, which was one of the pioneers of the pre-Internet. And I just happen to know as a bit of trivia that the very first e-mail was sent at Bolt, Beranek and Newman back in 1971, and the people involved with that then-pioneering experiment recognized pretty early on what the power of this was.

And one piece of that that just has recently struck me is it was possible then not only to communicate with who you knew but also with people you didn't know, because you have your e-mail address freely available online at your own website, so if I'm reading the *Content Nation* website and I want to ask you a question, I don't have to track you down, I don't have to know how to get to you. Now, I know how to get to you instantly. And to be able to communicate not only with those who we live with side by side, but with people absolutely anywhere and at all the various levels, that's a tremendous revolution.

BLOSSOM: Absolutely, and it goes back to the definition of content where people become aware that it's not just a matter of picking up Mom or Dad, but that there's this idea of an audience, that your communications can have scope and scale. And you may or may not have control or awareness of the scope or scale of that audience at any given time, but you have the potential for it, and I think that does change the way that people think about their communications and how they think about themselves as communicators.

KENNEALLY: Again, that reinforces the point in our earlier discussion about Iran. They recognized, the Iranians did, that they had an audience there and that that absolutely made a difference to them.



John, when you were doing the work on *Content Nation*, you made the step to say, I'm going to publish before the book is even published, which sounds kinds of contradictory, but indeed, that's what you did. You wrote much of the book online. You opened it up to commentary.

Tell us about that, because our audience here at *Beyond the Book* are people in publishing, authors and publishers alike and those who work with them, and there's occasionally some nervousness around letting go of the work, putting it online, that somehow if it's out there online, it's beyond your control. How did you wrestle with those questions and what were the results of that experiment for you?

BLOSSOM: I think overall, the results have been very positive. I decided early on that I wanted to write this book online, and although there were some early sections that I provided to my publisher, John Wiley and Sons, early on to give them a flavor of the book, almost all of the materials that are in the manuscript came from the wiki on contentnation.com where I put together the book. I used Web tools, cut and paste the results of that into more traditional Microsoft Word document, and then the publisher massaged those and trimmed those.

What was great is that I was able to blog about writing the book, so as I was coming up with new chapters, I'd put out new summaries of them in contentnation.com's blog and get feedback and begin to build some interest and excitement in the book.

So when the book finally hit, it wasn't a book that wound up in some section at the local library or book store. It was something that people were already pretty well familiar with in terms of content and the initial book sales were very promising as a result. It began to build some very quick buzz.

So it's something that needs to be mastered carefully, but overall, I encourage people to recognize that a book is really a relationship with an audience. To me, the physical book is certainly important. I like looking at the royalty reports and all that. But it's – to me, each book that I sell is memorialization of the fact that somebody's really interested in my work as an author.

So to me, the book is just one way to establish a relationship with my audience. I do that through the website, I do that through my speaking engagements and consulting. So any way that I can build those relationships is a good thing, and as I think of new books to work on, I hope to do likewise to be able to share some of these early materials as much as possible out there online to be able to build interest in what the book is all about. Because I think what you find is that enthusiasts build enthusiasts.

KENNEALLY: Yes, that's a good way to put it.



We're talking with John Blossom, the founder of Shore Communication and author of *Content Nation*.

John, I was going to ask, though, how did you incorporate comments? Did you just use them as food for thought or did whatever somebody might have written actually wind up in the book?

BLOSSOM: In fact, I did get a fair amount of material that came from people that I did put in the book. I actively solicited from the Content Nation community. Please contribute your own ideas. And I got several very valuable contributions that wound up as either entire sections in the book or quotes or what have you. So the community interactions were a key component in helping not only to build interest in the book, but to help build the book itself.

I think this concept of doing that is still a little bit new to people, and certainly, I was new to a lot of people as well, so I probably in my perfectionist mode, I would have liked more, but I was very pleased with that much information that I did get.

KENNEALLY: John, one thing that I wanted to take you back to is really the beginning of the book and a chapter you call Chasing the Mammoth. You make a link between the Digital Age and the Ice Age, and I think what you're doing there is philosophizing a bit about human nature. Tell us what you mean. How is the Digital Age and the Ice Age similar?

BLOSSOM: It's an interesting question and it's really what prompted me ultimately to go on and write a complete book on this topic. And if you do get to the end of the book, please hang in there. If you want to say, well, what's next with social media, go read chapters eight, nine and 10, because you're going to get a pretty thrilling framing of the potential of social media for humankind as a whole.

In the beginning of the book, I talk about our Ice Age ancestors, and what was it like before publishing as we knew it came along? We were wandering tribes and we were a very mobile society. We shared stories around campfires. There was this social distribution of information. And it was only when society got complex enough after the Ice Age, because of things like farming that tied us down to specific locations and made trade and commerce more complex, that we began to use writing as a form of publishing to be able to organize financial systems and eventually civilizations.

And that's all well and good, but what we've discovered through history is that civilizations really aren't as successful as our ancestors in adapting to changes in the environment. Our Ice Age ancestors lived through any number of periods of warm and cold weather, vast changes to our environment, and they survived this well with their communication tools through social means of communication that were very flexible.



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And the relative inflexibility of publishing as we've known it until recently made for huge civilizations that tended to die out within centuries, maybe a millennia, a thousand years or so, but never much more than that.

So I think what we're looking at in the future with all the rapid changes to the Earth's climate, is a necessity for humankind to be able to reorganize itself more rapidly in response to changes in our natural environment and in our economic environment as well. So I think what we see is that in a lot of ways, if publishing is an extension of our societal DNA, the thing that creates society as an organism, social media is restructuring the DNA of society itself and allowing humankind to use our Ice Age roots as human beings who are very adaptable much more effectively using today's social media tools.

And in the very end of the book, I extrapolate. What does this mean for society 50 years from now, 100 years from now, 1,000 years from now, 10,000 years from now? And I won't give the whole thing away, but if you read the very beginning of the book that Chris mentioned, you'll have fun at the very ending of the book because you'll see a very familiar scene that's yet very different.

KENNEALLY: All right. We'll look forward to that. John, we've been sitting around the virtual campfire here with you for this latest edition of *Beyond the Book*. I want to thank John Blossom for joining us. John is the co-founder – founder, excuse me – of Shore Communications, the author of *Content Nation: Surviving and Thriving as Social Media Changes our Work, our Lives and our Future*, and he has been recognized in the past as really one of the leading observers of the communications scene. He won a Vendor of the Year award from Standard and Poor's and his company, Shore Communications, has been recognized as one of the 100 content industry companies that matter most by *EContent Magazine*.

John Blossom, thank you very much for joining *Beyond the Book*.

BLOSSOM: It's been my pleasure, Chris. Thank you.

KENNEALLY: John, thanks again. And thank you all for listening. We look forward to having you back again very soon with the latest from *Beyond the Book*. My name's Chris Kenneally. Take care.

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