



Ancient Update for Storytelling Interview with Allen Lau, co-founder, Wattpad

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KENNEALLY: The Internet is a global phenomenon, yet we typically see it through our own limited nationalistic or cultural perspectives. For many in North America, that means the Internet is in English, delivering media and services produced by and for North Americans. You likely have never wondered what is the number one mobile website in the Philippines. Southeast Asia simply doesn't make it on our radar or our smart phones. But the founder of that very website is a Toronto-based serial entrepreneur who believes that publishing must open up to languages and communities of all sizes, and that the way to do this is to return to the ancient art of storytelling.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. Allen Lau, co-founder of Wattpad, has harnessed the border-hopping power of the web to attract writers and readers from local communities in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia. More than a few times, his work has taken such local authors to a worldwide audience. Allen Lau, welcome to Beyond the Book.

LAU: Hi, Chris. Thanks for inviting me.

KENNEALLY: Well, we're very happy to have you join us, and we're curious to learn a bit more about Wattpad, described as the YouTube of stories, a new form of entertainment that combines mobile, social, and reading. Some of the numbers that you've racked up at Wattpad there – you've seen something like 18 million stories uploaded to date, with 15 million users, and every month, some three and a half billion minutes are spent on the Wattpad platform. In Africa, where readers, we know, are starved for books, and where few publishing companies thrive, Wattpad has published 4,000 stories last month. So tell us, Allen, what's going on? How did it happen that Wattpad came to have this global library in the palm of your hand?

LAU: Yeah, I think that, as you mentioned, storytelling is very universal. It's across different languages, across different cultures, across all of the countries. And if you look at the landscape out there, there are five billion mobile phones out there. Most of them will be connected to the Internet. If not now, it will be in the next few years. And if you look at the population out there, there are seven billion people out there. Half of them at least can read or write or both.

That being said, the traditional publishing system may not be able to spread the written word to every single corner of the world for a number of reasons, for both technology, logistic, the constraint of shipping physical books, or even in the digital space, having the right content available in the right country, in the right context, with the right language is still very challenging.

But one thing that the Internet is doing really well is connecting people even thousands of miles away very easily. So, as you mentioned, this is what Wattpad has been focusing on – mobile, social, and also e-reading. The combination of all of them allowed us to publish a huge number of content across many different languages to virtually every single corner of the world through the Internet and the mobile Internet.

KENNEALLY: Right, and, Allen Lau, it's interesting to me how you've approached all this. Wattpad was founded in 2006, and the growth was slow at first, but has really been phenomenal just in the most recent months. And you've taken a really thoughtful approach that I think could provide some lessons for publishing insiders of all kinds.

First of all, it is a mobile first approach. And you mentioned those five billion smart phones, or phones, I should say, that are out there in the world. And what you did was understand that in Asia, for example, it's the Android system that predominates, whereas, again, if we sit from our North American perspective, we often start with iOS.

LAU: Yes. If you look at the numbers, 80% of our traffic is coming from mobile devices today. We definitely took a mobile first approach. That means that we do have a website, and that's the website, if you go the browser, you can access all of the Wattpad content in a true browser, as well. And that still drives at least 20% of our traffic today. But very early on, we recognized the fact that – even like five, six years ago, when we first started, the Internet was pretty pervasive at the time. But we recognized the fact that in developing countries, for example, the desktop Internet wasn't as pervasive, and smart phones were coming.

When we first started in 2006, it was before iPhone, before Android. So the first version of Wattpad actually worked on the Nokia phones and the Motorola Razr and those type of models. And we were getting good traffic. The uptick was OK. But it wasn't like hockey stick growth.

But after the iPhone was launched in 2007, and subsequently Android launched in 2008 and became a really popular platform in '09 and 2010, at that time, Wattpad was really taking off, because, using Android as an example, it's a free operating



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system. The Android device that you can buy in developing countries today, the lowest high price point is approaching \$50 right now. It's very affordable.

And in many cases, the Android phone is the gateway for people living in those countries to the Internet. That's their only connection to the Internet. They skipped the desktop era. So as a company, putting a lot of focus on mobile devices and making sure the content is really easily accessible on those devices is one of the very crucial things that we did to make it work in those countries.

KENNEALLY: Right. And it certainly seems like you were very prescient back in 2006 and 2007, thinking about mobile delivery. But really, it was a personal thing for you. As I understand, you were trying to solve a problem you had. You were traveling a great deal and you wanted to be reading, and you wanted to read on your mobile device, but it just wasn't working the way you wanted it to.

LAU: Yep, yep. Because at the time, I traveled a lot. And as you know, as a traveler, you get stuck on the plane a lot of the time, for example, and you have no access to the Internet. And unfortunately, at the time, a lot of the content I really wanted to read was still on the Internet, and it's just very hard for me to access the content. And remember, it was 2006, before Kindle was even announced. So it was really early days.

And what I did was I did a prototype that allowed me to read content on the mobile devices, and that was the first original concept, because my time was so fragmented and I don't have access to desktop Internet most of the time, so I just want to do something that can entertain myself. That was the idea.

KENNEALLY: Right. And the idea here is, of course, that you were a reader. You weren't doing this because you were a writer looking to send into the world your latest novel. You just wanted to read other people's works.

LAU: Yeah, absolutely. I'm not a very good writer, I have to admit. My background is in engineering. So I have to admit I'm a very lousy writer. I'm not good enough to be a writer.

KENNEALLY: Well, I have to tell you, Allen, I am not very good at being an engineer, either. (laughter)

LAU: (laughter)

KENNEALLY: So I think that's only fair. But what's interesting here is the way that the Wattpad community has grown is far beyond what I imagine was the original language, which is English. And you've been using the crowdsourcing ability of the Internet to proliferate the number of languages you offer.

And what's fascinating is which languages pop up. I mentioned at the open that you are the number one mobile website in the Philippines, presumably published there in Tagalog, as well as perhaps other languages. And a surprise location in the top 15 of countries is Saudi Arabia. But all of these various languages developed in Wattpad through the users themselves, if I have that right.

LAU: Yep, that's right. Using the Philippines as an example, the country over there is actually very literary. But the publishing system over there is not as established. But it doesn't change the desire of the people. People still love to read, and people still love to write. But without an established system, the outlet doesn't exist for those people.

So in the case of the Philippines, one thing quite interesting is, as you may know, it's also a bilingual country. So some of the Filipino writers, they actually started writing in our English community first, and then they realized, hey, I can actually write in Tagalog. So some of the writers, they started to write Tagalog stories, and then grew the community from there.

And in other countries, there are different stories. In Spain, for example, there were one or two writers that became quite popular on Wattpad, and then it just went viral. So each country has their own stories, but what we've seen in common is the storytelling is very universal.

KENNEALLY: And we are chatting right now with Allen Lau, CEO and cofounder of Wattpad, and Allen based in Toronto there. Allen, we should tell people that the kinds of authors you get are certainly the young and the new authors, but many established authors have published with Wattpad, as well, including Margaret Atwood, Cory Doctorow, who we have featured here on our own program, Beyond the Book, and Paulo Coelho has a collection of short stories out there. But what's fascinating is the younger writers who really catch on with that young audience.

And so in particular, I'm thinking of an English-based young author, Jordan Lint, who had something like 95 million reads on Wattpad and has been published widely in the UK for a young adult audience. And as well, and this is a fascinating story, there is a Brazil-based writer, Lilian Carmine, who writes in English. She's had something like 20 million reads on Wattpad and was eventually picked up by a UK publisher who just assumed that she was a British author.

LAU: Yeah, and that is a very, very interesting story. In fact, she just visited our office yesterday. She's in Toronto today. That story is very interesting, because she has never traveled abroad, and coming to Toronto is the first time she ever traveled outside of Brazil. And she learned English by reading. She read a lot of really famous writers' works, published works, to learn the language.



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So she started on Wattpad and started to write stories, and as you said, got picked up by Random House in the UK. And the funny part is the person in Random House actually asked her if she can come to the office and meet up without realizing that she was actually living 4,000 miles away.

KENNEALLY: That's a wonderful story. And finally, Allen, I think we ought to point out something that is a really ingenious part of your Wattpad story. So there is this kind of chicken and egg issue where you can't have readers, users for Wattpad without some content for them, and you can't have content without users, since so much of it is to be generated by the public itself. But you were able to get a kick start by leveraging some free source of content. Tell us about that.

LAU: Yeah. It was a very classical chicken and egg problem, so to retain our early adopters, we have to have some content on Wattpad. So we worked with Project Gutenberg at the time. That allowed us to import a lot of the public domain books like *Pride and Prejudice* and all the works from Charles Dickens. We imported over 10,000 titles from Project Gutenberg. Because, as we talked about this very early on and in the podcast, we put a lot of focus on mobile.

And apparently, at the time, I wasn't the only person on there who would like to read on mobile phones. There are quite a few people out there facing the same problem. So at the time, in 2006 or 2007, when you searched for, let's say, reading *A Christmas Carol* or reading Charles Dickens on mobile, you could actually find Wattpad pretty high up in the Google search ranking. I don't think we were ever page one, but maybe page two or three if you searched for those key words. So that helped us to build the user base very early on. It wasn't huge, but that helped us to build a small community, and we leveraged that to continue, evolve, and improve Wattpad over time to become where we are today.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. Well, we've been chatting today with Allen Lau, who is the CEO and cofounder of Wattpad, based in Toronto. Allen, thanks so much for joining us.

LAU: Thank you so much for interviewing me.

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