



Interview with Danny O. Snow
Mythconceptions: Debunking the E-Book Hype
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KENNEALLY: The hype machine around eBooks is full swing, and we are going to take a look at some opportunity to debunk the myths that are cropping up. This is Chris Kenneally with *Beyond the Book*. Welcome to the show.

And we're going to be chatting today with Danny Snow, who is a publisher, and knows a bit about eBooks himself, with some thoughts from him as to why you shouldn't believe everything you hear or read. And joining us is Danny O. Snow. Danny, welcome to *Beyond the Book*.

SNOW: Hey, Chris. It's great to be here.

KENNEALLY: Well, it's a pleasure to have you with us. We'll tell people a bit about you, and your own work, and how you come to be an expert on this subject, and just what provokes you to want to debunk some of those myths. You know, as a journalist myself, there's nothing I like better than a bit of debunking. It's usually very useful, and is rather like sunshine – it does a lot to melt away fog and other obscuring meteorology.

Danny O. Snow is a Harvard graduate. He's the founder of Unlimited Publishing, and he's the author – co-author with Dan Pointer, of a book called *U-Publish.com*. He is frequently quoted about new publishing communication technologies by major print and broadcast media, including the Associated Press, National Public Radio, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and many, many more. And he's a senior fellow for the Society for New Communications Research in Palo Alto, a global think tank dedicated to the advanced study of new and emerging media, and moreover, he's a member of the board of an organization we are delighted to work with from time to time, the Independent Book Publishers Association.



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So, quite a background there, and I was attracted to all of this, as I mentioned, because I do enjoy a bit of debunking. Just very briefly, before we go into the details, how would you say the hype around eBooks – is it more hype than fact, or just enough hype to kind of misdirect people from time to time?

SNOW: Well, Chris, I don't think that the hype is intentional or mendacious in any way. But I do think that publishers, having observed what happened in the music business ten years ago, are on pins and needles not to be left in the dust of technology, only to find themselves either out of business, or with a greatly depressed revenue stream just a matter of a few years later because they were asleep at the switch.

KENNEALLY: Right, and that's a good point, and you made that in some of the remarks you prepared before all of this. And it is interesting to think that the music industry offers some lessons, both what to do, and what not to do.

SNOW: It certainly does, and I think we're going to see exactly the same thing with the movie industry, as broadband matures to the point where it becomes routine to download an enormous file. And publishers are very lucky to actually be behind the curve, which is kind of surprising, but we can learn from the mistakes, and the good things, that are done by others.

KENNEALLY: Absolutely. And you use an expression that I like. People have been talking about eBooks – we think we know what eBooks are. It might even be good to define that in just a minute.

But you have thankfully offered me a replacement to the unfortunate expression, pBooks, which is some people's way of talking about print books. You talk about tree-books. I like that. So there are eBooks, and there are tree-books.

May I ask, first, if you could report on whatever your research tells you about the proportion of eBooks to tree-books today? I mean, what are we talking about, really?

SNOW: Well, to be honest, Chris, it's really not even a significant market factor yet. All of the pressure that is on formerly print or tree publishers coming today is, again, because of their perception of the sea change that is occurring even as we speak.

So let's look at the print book industry in the United States. That is approximately a \$26 billion annual market, and that's billion with a B. On the other hand, I don't



have accurate stats for 2009, but in 2008, eBook sales – now, this is wholesale, not retail – were a little over \$30 million. So that would have been – I don't know, 2%, 3% maybe, at best? I mean, *Harry Potter* sold \$30 million worth of books in about four hours.

But just the same, again, publishers are highly motivated right now to not sit on their hands the way the record labels did, and wake up three years from now, when those figures have changed by several orders of magnitude.

KENNEALLY: Absolutely. And I think the other thing that they perhaps hope they have learned from the music industry is the whole subject of wrestling with control, how much control to have over the content, and how much control to sort of give up, if you will.

SNOW: You know, you're absolutely right. So often we discuss these things in strictly technological or business terms, but there's a whole creative and sociological or political aspect of this, which is, who controls the pipeline from the creator of – I'm going to use the trendy word content, whether that's print, music, art, what have you, to the end consumer.

KENNEALLY: Right. And I suppose with publishing, book publishing – and you've been a book publisher yourself, and particularly in the emerging field of print on demand, so you know something about this. It was, in the past at least, that book publishers never dealt directly with consumers. They worked with their sales force, who in turn, worked with the national chains and the independent book stores, who then, in turn, sold books to the end customer.

What eBooks seem to be doing is obliterating all of those middle parts, and taking publishers directly to the final reader.

SNOW: I think that's true, in part. At the same time, I also think you are going to see some – I call them artifacts, of the inefficient, old print publishing industry in the eBook realm as well.

So while it's true that the technology exists for a writer, not even a publisher, to make something available in electronic form over the web and sell it directly to readers, I think you're going to see places like – well, we already see, the Amazon Kindle, and now Apple's new announcement about the iBook Store. I think you're going to see those largely dominated by big publishers who have the technical resources, and frankly, the money, to repurpose their content for these wide variety



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of reading devices more readily than the smaller guy, who maybe can't have an IT department, or his own distribution relationship.

KENNEALLY: And because you are on the board of the Independent Book Publishers Association, if I may ask here about that briefly before we go into the various myths, and that is, what are you hearing from members of IBPA as to their own sentiment, at the moment? Are they happy to be able to stand back and watch the big guys fall on their face or not, and then learn from them, or are they all anxious that this is just another way to minimize or obscure their own contribution to the industry?

SNOW: Well, Chris, I honestly can't speak for the members of IBPA, or even the rest of the board, but speaking for myself, yet so many of the developments that are occurring, and many of them are occurring even as we speak today, certainly favor the independent route to distribution of content.

KENNEALLY: So in a fashion, it's the small publisher who is lucky to be where they are, at this point.

SNOW: That is my perception, absolutely. And I think we're going to see fewer and fewer middlemen standing between the writer and the reader, probably from now on.

KENNEALLY: There's a lot to follow here, and we really do appreciate chatting with you. We are talking to Danny O. Snow, who is the founder of Unlimited Publishing. He's a senior fellow for the Society for New Communications Research in Palo Alto, and he's about to debunk some myths.

So I know you've been wanting to do this, so let's get you started here. Myth number one – eBooks will soon overtake tree-books in the marketplace. Well, we've already sort of started down the road on that one. That's not about to happen soon.

SNOW: Right, Chris. I had – but my response to you earlier, I think, focused mostly on technology and business, but there's something going on here at a much deeper level that I think is intensely interesting, and I'm hoping that SNCR will be able to conduct a truly scientific survey about this in the not too distant future, and it's this.

Regardless of where you stand on the issue of print versus digital distribution, there are apparently some fundamental differences in the way that people interact with a printed book versus a computer screen. To be a little more specific, a piece of



paper reflects light. A computer screen emits light. And apparently, the human body, or at least, the human eye, is to some degree kind of hard-wired to respond differently to those types of stimuli.

That suggests to me that it may not be a rapid transition from tree-book to eBook. People will probably want to hold on to something that their bodies took hundreds, if not thousands of years to evolve into using.

A similar illustration of that would be the act of writing in the margins – we call it marginalia in the business, and think about this. If you have a tree-book, and you're jotting down your thoughts in the margin of that book, let's say that it doesn't even matter what your thoughts actually are, but the simple physical process of writing – and I don't mean typing, but writing with your hands, tends to reinforce your thought process and quite possibly, your retention and comprehension of the material.

So here again, there is an aspect of some cognitive or biological reasons why eBooks may not be as rapid to overtake tree-books in the marketplace, for reasons that we can't control, either with technology or with new business models.

KENNEALLY: And if I can throw in a thought, too, on that subject. There's a social aspect to this. I was thinking about this just recently, walking through Boston downtown, and into the windows of condos and apartments in Back Bay, and you typically will see, in the living room, a bookshelf. And people use the bookshelf, not only to put their books there, but in a way, to display to visitors, and maybe even to themselves, just what kind of a reader they are. And that doesn't happen when the iPad or the Kindle sits on a coffee table.

SNOW: I think you've made a really good point, Chris, but I have a confession to make. I intentionally put my coolest eBooks way high up in the listing of my iPhone, so that if somebody does happen to look, they'll go, wow, this guy is really well read.

KENNEALLY: (laughter)

SNOW: And I hide the Stephen King stuff down at the bottom, you know.

KENNEALLY: Well, I think we all do that in our – not only in our virtual bookshelves, but also in our actual bookshelves, right? The stuff that we rather find guilty pleasures are kind of hidden behind the sofa.



So really, what we're saying is here, a kind of a reassuring note about the book itself as object, but also, the book as a business.

SNOW: Yeah. And I would throw in one additional thought that's interesting to me, anyway, it has not really been explored too much in the mainstream media, is the possibility that eBooks will develop as a completely separate market from tree-books, and it will be no different than, well, I have these CDs, but I also have these books. And they'd just be one other media that people go out and buy.

KENNEALLY: Right, so really not in competition, per se, with the book itself, but as a supplement to it as another medium.

SNOW: Correct, or even – you might even go as far as thinking of books that don't even exist on paper, or books that don't even exist in digital form, for various reasons. They're just separate products.

KENNEALLY: Absolutely. Well, there's a lot there. Now, myth number two starts to get technical, and the potential for jargon is there, so we'll try to keep this clean, if we will. ePub formats, as a cure-all – why is that a myth, and I suppose we have to start by saying, what does that mean, ePub?

SNOW: OK, well, ePub is simply a file format for electronic publishing. It came out of the Open eBook initiative of the late '90s, which is now the International Digital Publishing Forum, IDPF.org. And it was an attempt, very early on, by those who were interested in or committed to the idea of electronic distribution of reading material, to simplify life.

And if I can step away for just a moment to put this in context with a little anecdote. In the early years, after Edison invented the light bulb, guess what? Every company that made light bulbs had a different size socket, and so as a result, if you had Company X's sockets, you had to buy Company Y's light bulbs. And that got potentially very confusing and problematic for the people that actually wanted to use light bulbs.

KENNEALLY: And that probably gave birth to the whole series of jokes about screwing in light bulbs, too.

SNOW: Ah, yes, and I think I may have been the butt of a couple of them.

KENNEALLY: OK.



SNOW: But just the same, over time, people came to their senses and realized, well, you know what would really make sense, if all light bulbs had the same size sockets, and then they would all be interchangeable.

So, ePub is intended to be something like that, for the digital world. The problem is that ePub is a fairly easy technical challenge or standard, if you are lucky enough to have your raw material for building a book in XML. But most publishers don't have their raw material for building a book in XML, they have it in PDF. And so, the jump from PDF to ePub, in a perfect world, would be a relatively fast, simple process, that would produce good results every time. But unfortunately, it isn't – at least, not yet.

So, earlier in the interview, you kind of asked about my motivations for exploring all this, and candidly, Chris, I'm a publisher myself, and I want to be doing electronic publishing, and lots of it. But as I have wandered into the process of moving from print to electronic publishing over the last couple of years, I've discovered it's really not all that simple. And a conversion, for example, from a PDF file from printing, to an ePub file – I can't recall for sure, but I don't think we've had even a single one that was perfect on the first pass. So, then you have to go back and do it again.

And for that reason – not to say that I don't believe in the promise of ePub to do wonders for the publishing world in the years ahead, just as the standardization of socket sizes did wonders for the light bulb industry.

Where we stand today, it's the process of moving from the print to electronic distribution simply is not very simple – or, at least, it's not very simple if you want to carry with it some of the leading business models and the potential for copy protection, or to avoid piracy.

KENNEALLY: Right. And you know, the sort of secret sauce for many publishers, of course, is their back list. And this is the books that sell year in and year out, the real tried and true, whether you're a small publisher or a major house. And I would imagine that, moving forward, you can address some of these issues, but looking back at that back list, it must be tough to think that you're going to have to abandon it, or in some way, not take full advantage of it, just because this new technology is so potentially difficult to work with.

SNOW: Well, you're right, Chris. But the good news is that we are right on the brink of making some really meaningful improvements and greater ease of use for that jump from the PDF back list to the ePub or otherwise digital front list.



I will even put some material right in the link on your site, where this interview is going to be posted, that people can pass through to get more details, but it is kind of technical, so I'm not going to go into it today.

KENNEALLY: Great. Well, I think that's something that people should be aware of, that this is very much a changing landscape, even when it comes to the formats themselves, and that takes us to myth number three, which you put as, eBooks will always be hard to publish. What do you mean? Why is that a myth, and – first of all, how did that perception come about, and then, why is it a myth? Why is it wrong?

SNOW: Well, my perception, Chris, is that what has happened is, lots and lots of publishers, just like me, have said, OK, I'm going to try some electronic publishing, and discovered that, gee, it's not easy, it's hard – that the business apparatus that wraps around the product once you have created it, even if it wasn't easy, is also pretty complicated and full of intermediaries, as we discussed at the top of the interview. And, that there is still a lot to be shaken out in terms of where we're going to go on the hardware side.

Right now, there are two, or three, or four single purpose, dedicated eBook reading devices, that have about – five million, I think, is an accurate number, of units on the street. But that does not include the newly released iPad, which could certainly add another million in the next year or so.

But then you also have, on the other side, mobile publishing – smartphones, iPhones, iPod Touches, Blackberries, the new Droids, the Palm Pre, of which my best estimate is that there are at least 50 million already in use. So the question becomes not only what file format are you going to use, but where are you going to target your market?

KENNEALLY: And of course, the experience that one has in those different devices is markedly different, and I think, has an impact on the consumer's perception of the quality of the book. You've been talking a bit about some of the differences between tree-books and eBooks, and the book, again, as object, the way it has been created, not just written, but created, published – that matters. And if, as a publisher, you care about that kind of quality, knowing that somebody is going to get less than the optimal experience because they are looking at it on a smartphone, for example, that could be troubling.



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SNOW: I agree with you in part, Chris. I think that in terms of pleasure reading, absolutely. The presentation is real important, and obviously, something like a coffee table book would seem almost ridiculous to read on an eReader of any kind.

But, an awful lot of reading today is done simply for information. And in that scenario, if I'm looking for instructions on how to build a tree house, I don't know how much I care about the page layout.

Just the same, you do make a good point. Publishers – and really, let's underscore the word publishers – care a lot about the visual appearance of what they publish. But me, personally, I'm not so sure that that's a trump card for the average lay reader.

KENNEALLY: Interesting point, and we'll see how well that turns out to be true. And finally, with myth number four, it's about the market for eBooks, whether it's peaking or not, and where it's all going. Talk to us –

SNOW: Absolutely. My first point would be this. I'm over 50, but I work with people who are generally under 30, and those people have smartphones nailed to the side of their head. They are inseparable from their smartphones. Moreover, they do everything on them.

I personally have questions about how many electronic devices do I have to carry around with me from place to place.

KENNEALLY: I think that's a really important point, yeah.

SNOW: But as a sociological thing, a person like me, in my position, but older, is kind of thinking of reading in a different way that somebody under 30 does. My guess is that people who were born and raised both with the Internet and with small, handheld portable devices that pretty much contain their entire lives, are going to perceive what a book is, and how they want to use it, in a fundamentally different way than I do.

So my challenge is to try to pay attention and keep up, so that my company doesn't end up with a bunch of dinosaurs. And that's what I try to do for other publishers, too.

KENNEALLY: Well, it certainly is a challenge for us all, I think, to keep up with this, and we're going to continue to try to do that here at *Beyond the Book*. And we've appreciated your contribution to that.



Danny O. Snow is the co-author, with Dan Pointner, of *U-Publish.com*, widely quoted in the media himself, and a publisher at Unlimited Publishing – also, a senior fellow for the Society for New Communications Research in Palo Alto, California.

Danny, it's been a pleasure to have you here on *Beyond the Book* today.

SNOW: Chris, I've loved having this conversation with you, and I hope we'll have more.

KENNEALLY: I expect we will, because eBooks, it's – as much as there are many myths here, this isn't going to go away anytime soon. And from time to time, we may want to have to have another one of these sessions where we gather up some new myths and debunk them, because I do think it's fun.

Again, we've been chatting with Danny O. Snow, debunking some myths about eBook. This is Chris Kenneally, your host for *Beyond the Book*. We are online, and you can become a fan of *Beyond the Book* if you're not already, become a fan of *Beyond the Book* at [Facebook.com/Beyond the Book](https://www.facebook.com/BeyondtheBook). We hope to see you there. And again, online.

Thank you all for listening. For everyone at Copyright Clearance Center, have a great day.

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