



Interview with Niko Pfund, Oxford University Press

**For podcast release
Monday, January 30, 2023**

KENNEALLY: University presses around the world contribute to what the Association of University Presses has called *bibliodiversity* by publishing nearly 20,000 books each year on emerging areas in the arts and sciences as well as discussions of pressing social issues. Not strictly commercial, yet still subject to market forces, UPs have long placed their titles with academic libraries and in local bookstores.

As readers confront the endless choices on the online bookshelf, though, what should university presses offer to hold the public's interest while satisfying the strict demands of scholarship? Can UP editors and staff sustainability meet the demands of social movements calling for a remake of publishing?

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

Oxford University, which began printing books in 1478, operates one of the oldest and most prestigious of university presses. In the US, Niko Pfund is president and academic publisher at OUP, where he faces challenges from the marketplace of ideas and from colleagues keen to redefine publishing and publishers. He joins me from his home office in Brooklyn. Welcome to the program, Niko.

PFUND: Hi, Chris. Thanks so much for having me. Always happy to chat about publishing and university presses.

KENNEALLY: Well, we're happy to have you join us and to talk about that particular subject, university presses. I want to ask you first about your thoughts on the role of UPs today in the entire publishing ecosystem and in a society that's skeptical of academics and authorities.

PFUND: Yeah, I think it depends a lot on the direction that we face. So if we're talking about the role that presses have played with regard to helping scholars communicate with one another within their own disciplinary communities, then I think what we do is largely the same. How we do it has changed dramatically. But the way we do that I think remains largely the same.



I think if you widen the lens and look at the broader culture, I'm struck by the ways in which a lot of the things that percolate up within the academy also then find their way out into the culture through the university presses. That can be everything from discussions about identity. It can be discussions about income inequality. I'm thinking, for instance, of Thomas Piketty's book *Capital*, which was published by Harvard and drove this global conversation about income inequality. It can be books that Oxford published 50, 70 years ago about environmentalism by Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold.

So I think that the role the presses play in that respect as a kind of seed bed or petri dish for these ideas – I think that's constant as well. I think it's more important now than it has been at any time I can think of in the time that I've been working in the industry, because I think that the forces of willful misrepresentation, of demagoguery, are louder and have themselves these bullhorns now that didn't exist 20, 25 years ago. So I think our role in combating those and relying on data and evidence and empiricism, rather than on emotion and an attempt to mislead, is more important now than ever.

KENNEALLY: In fact, the deep scrutiny of society and of scholarship that is a hallmark of the academic world must have an impact on your work at university presses like Oxford University Press. So are you optimistic or pessimistic that questions about legacies of racism, colonialism, and sexism will lead to lasting change at an institution like your own?

PFUND: Yeah, I'm actually very optimistic about it. And I think, honestly, if I weren't both optimistic and energized by it, I would be not in the right job. I think that the changes that we've seen that have kind of rolled over the social landscape, the academic landscape, over the course of the last four or five years particularly not only are leading the lasting change, but I think already have led the lasting change. We've instituted a series of guidelines around how we ask our authors to do their work, how we ask reviewers to think of the peer review process, certainly how we hire. So I think there's been a lot of – those changes have already been implemented. And I think once those are implemented, they don't tend to, in my experience, get reversed.

I think one of the challenges for us, given that we are essentially the voice of the academy, is that the composition of our author body often does mirror that of the academy. So if I were to say, for instance, that I want from one year to the next to have a 50/50 gender mix, let's say, in any of our disciplinary communities, there are some disciplinary communities that are overwhelmingly male – economics, classics. So these kinds of edicts would be very hard to live by without just massively contracting the amount of publishing we do.

That said, I don't want to sound hopeless or powerless in this respect. I think we actually are doing a lot, even as the tail to the academy's dog, to try to direct things in certain directions, and to do that all while focusing on our core mandate, which is, in fact,



reflecting what is happening in the academy. I have to say I think a lot of the last five years have given a new life to a lot of industry veterans. It's not that it's not difficult. It's challenging. It's hard. It's complicated. It's stressful. But I think it's long overdue, and I think that some of the changes we've made already have been well received and are actually yielding pretty positive results.

KENNEALLY: I like the idea – that academy dog that you're the tail of. But I wonder whether it's the question of who's walking whom, because it could be, can't it, that university presses can lead faculty, can lead the institutions, in directions that it might not have thought it would go?

PFUND: Yeah, and I think we have a lot of examples of that. One of the examples I find myself just autobiographically referencing is the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, which we published when I was just starting at Oxford in the late '80s. It was a 20-volume series that expanded to 30 volumes over time, and it essentially recovered an entire literary canon of Black women's writing in this country. I do think that's where the role of a university press is quite specific, and even the role of a press like Oxford, because Oxford, given the nature of the OED, given the nature of our reference publishing, it does lend a certain gravitas or imprint that I flatter myself in thinking that maybe other presses don't have quite that same impact.

And there are presses – a lot of the work around women's writing has been published by Virago and Feminist Press, and that's spectacularly good work. But when Oxford essentially says this is a body of literature that should be codified and enter the canon, it does have that effect you were describing of basically nudging things in a certain direction, and I think that that is a real positive.

At the same time, I do introductions to OUP staff on a regular basis, and one of the points I'm at pains to make these days is to emphasize that we are not exclusively a publisher of social justice – or a social justice publisher, I should say. By that, I mean that a lot of social science work I think when published and listened to and heard by legislators and politicians can have a very salutary effect on economic and social justice, but we do that in our capacity as academic publishers, not as agents of social justice. That may sound like a specious distinction. I think it's actually an absolutely crucial distinction. Because if people think of us as a social justice publisher, they will unavoidably be disappointed. But I think that by virtue of being a publisher of social justice as a component of our larger mission, that work is often heard and has a greater influence than it would be if we were an explicitly – if our compass was explicitly oriented towards social justice.



KENNEALLY: That's an important point, isn't it – that distinction as being a publisher of social justice rather than a social justice publisher? That might be one that is clear in your own mind, but staff may have questions about the difference. Do they?

PFUND: They do, and I think that their expectations – I think there are a lot of different expectations these days of people in positions such as mine. I personally find the whole Steve Jobs/Jack Welch school of alpha male leadership debatable on a number of grounds, but I think it's just not the moment for that kind of approach to trying to move organizations in the right direction. So I think that being more consultative, listening to people more, and actually trying to – I have to say I personally have been influenced over the course of my life by the life of Bob Moses – not the New York City urban planner, but the person who was responsible for leading the Mississippi voter registration drive in 1965. One of the anecdotes of his life – he wore these OshKosh B'Gosh overalls, and when he realized that all these white college students who were coming down to the South to help register Black voters were basically mimicking his style of dress, that made him profoundly uneasy, and he considered it to be almost a form of unhelpful idolatry.

Of course, the whole argument about community organizing – the emphasis is on community. So I think that drawing on the force and the power of your staff's passions and your colleagues' passions and giving them a voice, even if you don't agree with what they're saying – that, to me, is the most interesting aspect of this kind of a job. And it actually reflects the editorial culture of most publishing companies, where when you decide what to publish, you're doing so by virtue of an editorial meeting or a debate from various functions and various people, saying, yes, this is something we should publish, or no, this is intellectually not as sound as it needs to be, and then the whole conversation about what the commercial value of something is.

So I think that reflecting in your practices, whether it's in the core practice of publishing or in how you organize your publishing house – I think there's a lot of consistency there, and that's beneficial.

KENNEALLY: How challenging is it to have that conversation today? Because for the last couple of years with the pandemic, there's been a working from home culture that has subsumed the office culture. There's a return to the office going on, of course. How important is it for OUP that the office be a place where culture is sustained and where it thrives?

PFUND: Yeah, this is something, obviously, that we're all trying to work through on a daily basis. I think I've probably now read literally hundreds of articles in places like *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Economist* and the *FT* and the *Harvard Business Review* and all these places about whether a physical geographic nexus is crucial to the culture of an



organization. I think that my current thinking about this is that the office is essentially a very helpful shortcut. It's a gathering ground. It's a place where people come together and collide. And without succumbing to this often somewhat inflated language of you have this cross-pollination of ideas when people get together – I think some of that is a bit overstated. But I do think that that's a crucial part of getting to know the people you work with.

And I think that when you talk to most publishing companies – people who retire from Oxford, people who retire from a lot of houses – what they often refer back to is the fact that their colleagues became their friends, that this notion about work/life balance gradually shifts over time into a form of work/life integration. I think that it's very hard to achieve that. You can achieve it. I think it's more difficult and it's a bit more labor to do that if you don't have an office. And I say that as somebody who is not sold on this idea of having butts in seats five days a week.

So I do think that we're in the process of still sort of figuring all of this out, and it's going to be some time, I think. It depends a lot, also, on the industry. For instance, editorial work I think is quite solitary work. So I think that that is something that I'm less focused on, especially for newcomers, for people new to the industry – if I had not been hanging out and playing softball and going for a drink after work with people, I don't think I would have developed those relationships.

Just one final thought on this – because I've given this so much thought, to the earlier point about trying to lead an organization at this time, I think one of the perils of middle age is that you find yourself wanting things to be for others the way they were for you at that age. And I'm very conscious of the fact – when I was an editorial assistant at Oxford, there was no internet. So the idea that it is exactly the same for people who are in their early 20s and are entering the workforce for the first time – that would be obviously ludicrous.

At the same time, while I don't want to impose my experiences on others as a form of policy, when we have brought people together into the office – we've had several new joiners events, as we call them, where people come and get together. And having observed people, there is just this sense of playfulness and social life and joyfulness that comes when these folks are together, because it's an odd transition going from your pre-college life, where you've been largely educated in a formal way, to suddenly now you kind of fall off that post-graduate cliff, and you're just making your way. You're figuring it all out. And to be in the company of others who are doing the same thing I think is really important.

So I think this is not just an interesting issue with regard to publishing houses. This is an interesting issue with regard to urban spaces, tax base – the implications of this are



absolutely huge. And I think five, 10 years from now, I suspect the conversation and my answer would probably be quite different. But that's my thought for now.

KENNEALLY: And, Niko Pfund, we associate university presses with great books, yet the impact of journals in scholarly communications dwarfs the impact of books. So does that emphasis on books raise concerns for you? Should the reading public and even publishing professionals take more notice of journals publishing?

PFUND: Well, I think the short answer is yes. I think that the longer answer – and if you talk to anybody who has spent their life working in journals, they do feel, I think, a sense of perhaps mild resentment about the emphasis that is paid to books. But I think journals are inherently the coin of the realm in certain academic disciplines, mostly in the sciences and in technical disciplines and in medicine. They serve a very particular purpose there. And books don't really exist in the same way. That applies to some extent in the social sciences. In economics, you're credentialized for publishing in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* more so than you are by publishing a book with Oxford University Press. So I think it just varies from area to area.

It was interesting thinking about this just in terms of the question you've posed, because I don't think of it juxtaposed in that way. I'm often asked by my colleagues or by other people, what do your authors want? And my response, unsatisfyingly, is always it varies. Because if you go to a life scientist and you begin trying to make their prose more lyrical, often their response is going to be, listen, this is not a poem. This is research. I want it out quickly. Whereas if you are talking to a literary scholar or somebody in sociology – an ethnographer who's writing a book about a community that has been damaged by fracking, say – in order for that book to actually extend outside of the academy, it does need to have a narrative tension. It does need to read well. So I think that it varies depending upon the individual area.

Journals are basically a form of academic communication, as are books. But books are also a means of transmitting information into the public sphere for nonfiction works, and I think that that's where the emphasis on books comes from.

KENNEALLY: As a publisher, as a university publisher, what's your preferred metric, Niko Pfund? Is it gut feeling or user metrics?

PFUND: Well, again, I would say I reject the oppositionalism of the two. I would say you draw on all of it, right? You draw on sales data, you draw on past experience, you draw on usage metrics, you draw on author platforms. There's so many different ways in which we can now evaluate things. And I think it also varies from fiction to nonfiction. I think fiction inherently is more subjective, because it involves literary taste. So I think there,



instinct and gut feeling is more of an issue. Whereas the kind of nonfiction that is most frequently published by university presses that is read by the general public – and that would be history, current events, politics, science – that relies on reading the zeitgeist, the moment. So I think that it's really important that you draw on all of it.

I also think it's worth mentioning that it really depends on what you consider success to be. If you look, for instance, at a very common category in the trade world, which is biography – whether it's Hermione Lee writing a book about the playwright Tom Stoppard, whether it's Jeffrey Stewart writing a Pulitzer Prize-, National Book Award-winning biography of Alain Locke which we published a couple years ago, whether it's Nell Painter writing about Sojourner Truth, I think the question is what are you trying to do here? Are you trying to make money? Are you trying to bring a life back into public consciousness, which I think is often what it is? As in the case of Beverly Gage's new book about J. Edgar Hoover, are you trying to actually provide a new lens or a new interpretation of this already very famous person? What you're almost certainly not trying to do is get wealthy, because chances are, given the thousands of hours that people spend on biographies, that you could work a minimum-wage job and do better.

I think the same holds true for publishers. The Alain Locke biography that we published – was that a book that generated a massive sum of money for the author or the press? No, not really. But it was a book that we were disproportionately proud to publish. It had been under contract for 25 years. The editor, Susan Ferber, and the author had worked and worked and worked on this book through multiple drafts. And it brings back to life somebody who many consider to be the father of the Harlem Renaissance.

I think that when you bring all these factors of usage and metrics and platform and gut instinct together, it also depends on what you're doing it for. And I think different factors there get emphasized depending on what the answer to that question is.

KENNEALLY: Niko Pfund, president and academic publisher at Oxford University Press, thanks for bringing all that together for us and for speaking with me today.

PFUND: My pleasure. Thanks so much for having me.

KENNEALLY: Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can listen to Velocity of Content on demand on YouTube as part of the Copyright Clearance Center channel and subscribe wherever you go for podcasts. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for joining me on Velocity of Content from CCC.

END OF FILE

