



**Beyond Publishers
Interview with Rüdiger Wischenbart**

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KENNEALLY: Continents famously drift. Tectonic plates floating over the Earth's crust move slowly, then collide dramatically. In publishing over the last 20 years, such seismic activity has reshaped the landscape, creating new geographies for the book business.

Welcome to CCC's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

Publishing industry analyst Rüdiger Wischenbart wants your help to map the new uncharted territories of the book business. From a bird's-eye view, Wischenbart asserts, our new publishing planet has few major continents. It is largely an open sea dotted by islands and archipelagoes. Self-publishing, subscription, and streaming lie among these new lands and far beyond the reach of most traditional publishers. Do books even matter in such exotic territories?

Rüdiger Wischenbart joins me now from Vienna. Welcome to the program, Rüdiger.

WISCHENBART: Thank you, Chris, for having me.

KENNEALLY: We're happy to have you back. As a book business analyst, you've been best known, perhaps, for the annual report, Global 50 Ranking of the Publishing Industry. We've had you on the show to talk about it. It is an essential audit for publishers, authors, and technology vendors. But you're concerned by the idea that so much about the book and the book business is getting left out. Rüdiger Wischenbart, what do you think you're missing about the book business? Where are the blind spots?

WISCHENBART: To be honest, it was when I wrote my analysis for last year's edition that I suddenly said, oh my God, there are really big chunks of the industry that are not here. For instance, all of self-publishing is happening outside of the big publishing companies. Another discovery was in educational publishing, some publishing companies were suddenly growing, but not by selling more books. They were just buying schools and enrolled teachers – but not a couple of teachers as experts, many teachers. That was to be observed from Korea to Brazil and to Germany.

I was screening my own ranking, and the more I was digging into it, the more missing parts I discovered. And then I realized, wait a moment, many of these sales, many of that



business activity, and many of that cultural reach of publishing is not measured by the major market analyst companies either. The NPD or Nielsen, or in Germany, Media Control data that we get are not really portraying what is pumped, really, in a big pipeline on the smartphones of kids in the form of webtoons. This is not a competition to book reading, but I realized from the kids of France, for instance, it's the avid readers who now seamlessly would switch between their cartoons on the phone and the thick novel.

To round it up, suddenly I realized, who would have thought that the kids would use social media, which are digital by definition, to praise and discover and display printed books on their bookshelves via a Chinese network? So it was mind-boggling to see there is a lot to reconsider and to explore.

KENNEALLY: And the new report you're working on, Rüdiger, is called Beyond Publishers. You start with the biggest question and possibly the biggest blind spot of all – what is a book in 2023? Tell us what you think may be some of the answers, and why does the answer even matter?

WISCHENBART: That goes back to an academic article that I coauthored with three academic friends of mine – one from Slovenia, one from the Netherlands, and one from the United Kingdom – where we for quite some time, for half a year or nine months, among us started to discuss, how would we define what is a book today? There is a famous UNESCO-framed definition from the early 1960s saying it's a publication for the public of more than 49 pages and two covers. So it has a beginning and an end. 49 pages is more than just a short story. It's a work. It's not just a diary.

I just wanted to be a little bit provocative, asking my friends – tell me, why is an IKEA catalog or any other mail-order catalog not a book? We had a hard time coming up with definitions that would exclude that. At the same time, an audiobook, for instance, is not for reading. You cannot read an audiobook. And in the brain, it's something completely different. Yet it's a growing part of the book business from the traditional publishing companies.

Then I come back to the webtoons and to Wattpad and to self-publishing. That is definitely part of what we would call the book business, what authors are doing, what readers are enjoying, but how can you define this? And if you cannot define and frame it, guess what? It's not measured.

I started to compare, for instance, print top bestselling lists in various markets. We're doing that for many years. And I compared that to self-publishing bestselling charts and stuff like this. These are two worlds with quite a little overlap only. So I realized, wait a moment, the bestselling charts are for many publishing companies the guideline when they



need to decide where to put their money. For that, you need to measure. Because you say, oh, I want to bet on books that will make it big. But if there are others that I don't see in these measurements, I'm navigating in uncharted territory, and perhaps I place my dollars, euros, yen, renminbi onto the totally wrong product.

KENNEALLY: What you're describing, Rüdiger Wischenbart, is kind of a breakdown in the traditional value chain for book publishing. How did we get here?

WISCHENBART: I guess the value chain and the supply chain has been overlooked by many throughout the industry – not by everybody. Of course, the very big publishing corporations heavily invested in the past decade. The big five in the US, for instance, heavily invested into improving their supply chain. But we have very different models in different markets. Some smaller markets in central Europe have very strongly vertically integrated supply chains, where publishers own bookshop chains and wholesaling. In other territories, that doesn't exist hardly at all. So we see suddenly that there are very different models. But like all the rest of the economy, it was getting more and more complicated and more and more complex. That was covered again only very partially by the trade media, because they were more interested in portraying the bestselling authors or stuff like this. Therefore, we lost track.

And at the same time, like in every other industry, digitization was not about ebooks. Digitization was about the processes that linked the author's manuscript with the reader and all that direct-to-consumer marketing, all the different production technologies. Suddenly, publishing companies had to handle different formats – print, digital, audiobooks. They had to fill their products into sales channels that were very, very, very different. You mentioned subscription and streaming. There are almost turf wars going on, pro and con. But in a broad perspective, we see subscription has found a very, very broad place on the consumer's end. Therefore, it became much more complex. That is where we stand now – that suddenly, we have to step back and re-conceive how that industry is working.

KENNEALLY: So without clear answers to many of these important questions you're raising, Rüdiger Wischenbart, the publishing industry is sailing along in new waters, uncharted seas. What do you think book sale figures in particular are trying to tell us about the conditions for these seas?

WISCHENBART: I guess we have a mix of very diverse things. We have lots of new opportunities. We have lots of new players. We have a new geography of global publishing. I can come back to that in a minute. But also, it puts a lot of competitive pressure on the traditional houses. Perhaps not so much on the big five, the largest corporations, but on those in the middle, they are squeezed, because they have all the cost,



all the challenge of handling these new complexities, but not the same resources and not the same kind of revenue. The same applies to small markets. Think of markets not in the English or Spanish language, but in central and eastern Europe, where we have a few million in some language regions. They also want to do audiobooks. And the cost for producing an audiobook is the same. But when you have just a few million customers, it's hard to get good returns. I guess the simplest way to put it is we are really redrawing the map that we are working with.

KENNEALLY: And you want to get some answers about all the changes that have been brought by platforms like Spotify, webtoons, and Wattpad, as well as how publishing processes have been changed by these new models. How can someone contribute to your research?

WISCHENBART: Well, I'm asking very simple questions. I'm asking questions like how did the recommendation that you are using for finding new books – how has this changed over the past couple of years? Or when you read books, in what formats? Is it either/or, one or the other, or is it suddenly a mix? Give me answers of that kind. I thought I can do a questionnaire – and normally, you have 10, 20 questions here – and I ended up with a very short questionnaire of just three questions of that kind. And I would love people to go to that questionnaire and give me their assessments.

The third question is about how big is that unexplored or missed part? Personally, I'm convinced it's really very significant, but it's very, very hard to even have ballpark estimates. Again, I believe that many players, many professionals in that context, have a very good sense of part of this, and I would love to get their replies. And if they go to my blog – there are two ways to get to my blog. One is wischenbart.com, and there is a button, blog. Or you go to the blog's name, which is Booklab, like laboratory – booklab.info. And you'll find the link to the questionnaire, and you'll find the link to a little presentation that rolls out what I'm intending to do.

KENNEALLY: Well, we hope our listeners can be helpful to you in your work, Rüdiger Wischenbart, and we hope you'll return later this year when you have the results of this work. But for the meantime, thank you very much for joining me today on Velocity of Content.

WISCHENBART: Thank you so much. I really look forward to all the new information and the new leads that I will be getting.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts, and please do follow us on Twitter and on Facebook. You can also find Velocity of Content on YouTube as part of the CCC channel. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Goodbye.



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