KENNEALLY: Three summers ago, the world seemed frozen and convulsed all at once. The coronavirus pandemic that began in March 2020 and the lockdown orders that followed restricted entire nations only to the most necessary activities. The murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers in May sparked worldwide demonstrations against racism and brought the Black Lives Matter movement to homepages and front pages everywhere.

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

36 months later, the world has moved on. Pandemic restrictions have lifted, and urban centers are mostly free of protests. But how have we changed? In publishing especially, what is different about our jobs, our professional relationships, and our attitudes? Did you answer everything or nothing?

That question – “How have we really changed?” – is the challenge presented by Dianndra Roberts, the senior publishing coordinator for the Royal College of Psychiatrists. Dianndra Roberts co-chairs the DEI Advisory Council for the International Society of Managing and Technical Editors and is the DEIA associate editor and a chef for The Scholarly Kitchen blog published by SSP, the Society of Scholarly Publishing.

Dianndra Roberts joins me now from London to share her reflections on the progress made since the summer of 2020 toward ending the cycle of racism and discrimination in publishing and everywhere. Dianndra Roberts, welcome to Velocity of Content.

ROBERTS: Hello. Thank you for having me, Chris.

KENNEALLY: I’m excited about this conversation. It’s an important one, and I really want to hear what you have to say about all of these points. 2020 brought calls for many in publishing to make room at the table for people of color as well as those in the LGBTQ community. Did those invitations lead to lasting difference, Dianndra? And if those from previously marginalized communities have a seat today, do you think they’re being heard?
ROBERTS: I think that question in itself is the big question. Are people being given more seats since 2020? Yes. I am a product of being given a seat and an opportunity to be in the room. But again, I think what you asked is really important – are people being heard? I have been offered spaces in rooms and not been heard, or I’m put in those rooms to say, hey, we did do that thing that we should all be doing now. Because let’s be real – some people feel guilty. And there are other rooms that I’ve been put into where I have a voice. I have an opinion. It matters. And it’s taken seriously, and I feel welcomed into the space.

This isn’t even getting on to the idea of are we inviting people into spaces that aren’t safe? Because that in itself is a whole different bag of we want people to join us, we want people to say we’re inclusive, we want to say, oh, we’re champions of diversity, equity, or inclusion.

Accessibility I think is another thing. We also have to acknowledge that now, we’re starting to have the discussions of what are we doing in terms of helping those be in the room with disability, and what are we doing to make sure that they are able to be in the room physically, metaphorically? What are we doing? I think that’s a newer conversation. Not to say that it hasn’t been happening, but I think more people are having that conversation now, and that’s three years from when the first elements of we need DEI, EDI people in buildings, offices. Everyone was getting some sort of person. Now, if you look for those roles in recruitment, they’re not really available or existing as they were three years ago.

I feel like I’ve completely gone to the side of your question, but yes, I think we are being invited into spaces. I don’t necessarily know if everybody being invited into spaces – it’s genuine. That, I don’t have an answer to. I would like to say a lot of them are, although I think a lot of them aren’t based on action. I don’t know. Does that make me sound jaded? (laughter)

KENNEALLY: In fact, Dianndra Roberts, jaded or just honest, we really appreciate hearing what you think about this. And I want to ask what it means to be safe. Tell us how places where people are invited can be safer.

ROBERTS: So I think safety – it’s a big one, because it means different things for different people, and I will entirely exclude the safety of anyone who is racist. Your safety is not my concern. My concern is the marginalized communities who want to feel safer in spaces that have never belonged to us. So making sure that people feel heard, that they are actually comfortable in a way of – they can walk into a physical space, and it is comfortable.
It’s not – for example, I can be told a safer space, but the minute somebody tries to touch my hair, which happens a lot – still happening. Solange made a whole song about it, and here we are. It’s like I don’t feel safe, because I don’t feel like a person. I feel now like some sort of commodity, because another random person has come up to me and immediately started petting me. That’s not a safe space. And the response can be, oh my gosh, I’m just a really touchy-feely person. I don’t care, because I don’t know you. And you don’t do it to other people. You can like my hair. It’s great. You can also like it from a distance and just say, hey, I like your hair. Cool, thanks.

So it’s ensuring that those boundaries are really set when somebody’s going into that space, ensuring that language that’s being used – it’s always the term banter, especially in the UK. We love a bit of bants. But not everything that is called banter is actually banter. You’re just making jokes at people. You’re making people feel uncomfortable. You’re also being – insert homophobic, racist, ableist as such. Sometimes, it’s intentional. Even if it’s not intentional, it’s what you do to turn that around.

And I guess it’s being mindful, being human-first. I like to use that term. I think I picked that up from somebody I worked with at one point. And it is ensuring that you’re treating people as actual people and not tokens, not commodities, not, well, they’re only here because we’re filling a quota. We need to make sure we look good. You’re actually treating them as people, and you’re ensuring that when we’re all together in that room that everybody has the capacity to be themselves. And it’s very hard. I can’t say I can walk into every room and be myself, even rooms I’ve walked into many times. I definitely have to be a version of myself for my own safety. But we need to ensure that people can be the closest to themselves as possible. I think whatever that sort of recipe is to get there for somebody or a group of people is what we need to do.

There’s no one size fits all on how we get that. What you do need to do is believe people. And if somebody has a capacity where they can speak up – because you can’t always do that. I’ve definitely been in situations where I’ve been scared to say I don’t feel safe here, but I can’t. One, I’m in a junior position. I don’t have any allies. Who am I really going to say that to when the person who’s partly doing it is really senior to me?

So if somebody turns around and says, look, this is not safe for me, I don’t feel comfortable, this is a recurring thing, then we need to believe them, and we need to see what we can do with what’s happening to them and how we can change that. Because sometimes, it’s an environmental thing. There are many companies who are like, oh, we support all people joining us. Proceed to change no policy, no environmental culture – like, yeah, we support anyone who wants to come and work here, but we don’t have certain maternity leave, certain parental leave in general, sick leave, health benefits, things like that. And it’s like, well, then you don’t want everybody to come and work here, because
you’re already not doing things before they get in the door. It’s a lot, but it’s not impossible. And I think it’s really looking at how are we approaching people, and what are we doing to maintain that humanity at the beginning and not corporate responsibility?

KENNEALLY: Diandra Roberts, representation is clearly essential. Yet how well do you think publishing has moved toward participation in all levels of its businesses?

ROBERTS: That is a very interesting question, Chris. I think right now, publishing needs to walk the walk. There’s a lot of talk about what needs to be done, how we can do more, who is doing what or who’s thinking about what – a lot of thinkpieces. And I’ve just been seeing it for the past three years – a lot of this is what we can think we can do. This is how we think we can. OK. Well, what are you actually doing?

Now, I think I’m more trying to hold people accountable for their actions, and I think that was a large part of what brought me to write my last Scholarly Kitchen post was, well, what are you actually doing at this point? Because it’s been three years of saying we need to make change. We need to do this. It’s a lot of blah-blah-blah, I’m going to be honest. Because I read a lot of things and statements. I’m always reading statements – mission statements, plans. And I’m like, OK, so how much of that have you done? Where’s the action plan that goes behind the mission statement? And where’s the work that’s happening? It’s not all about statistics, but where is the change? If you’re saying you want a more diverse workforce, and you’re really encouraging people – again, it goes back to having a safer environment for people.

Realistically, people like myself – we’re not stupid. We can walk into an interview and know when a place is not going to be for us. As much as you’re interviewing for somebody to join you, they are interviewing to see whether that is somewhere that they want to be. I’ve walked into interviews and have been like, well, that’s not for me. Based on my experience in this space, based on – whether it’s somebody questioning why I’m there. Why am I here for this interview? Am I sure that I’m really applying for this role? Is it meant to be me? Or when somebody reads my name out, and they’re like, oh. And I’m like, what’s up? They’re like, oh, we didn’t think you’d be Black. And I’m like, OK, great. (laughter) Well, I don’t to work here now. So thanks, bye. I can laugh about it now, but I also know that’s not an individual experience for me. That’s happened to a lot of people I know and probably people I don’t know.

Are we genuinely making the change in places? I’m seeing it in some places, and I’m definitely seeing places bring people into the space, want to change things structurally – which is where we’re going to see the most impact is the structure or the policies, where people are really making these rules that are going to bring people in, and again changes the safety of the situation.
But I’m also seeing a lot of like, yeah, we put up a flag to say, “Black Lives Matter,” and we put up the rainbow during Pride Month, and we’re going to call it a day. We need to shift the balance of who’s doing the actual intentional work and who’s just doing it to say it sounds good and maybe get an award at the end of the day or a pat on the back. I haven’t seen the change – the balance is off, but I’m hopeful that we’re getting to a place where we’re seeing more and more change.

I would love to work in a place where I’m not the only Black person in publishing. I’m currently in a place where I’m not the only Black person in the building. This is the first time that’s happened to me, which is great. It’s nice to walk around and see other people who look like me. But I’m still going to a lot of places, a lot of conferences, and there’s very few people who look like me or represent things that I represent. So yeah, we need to do a bit more of the work and really do – like less talk, more work. I think that needs to be the push for the change. Then we can say, yes, we’re being more representative, I think.

KENNEALLY: Let’s talk about that word, Dianndra Roberts. Many people, of course, say they support diversity. They believe themselves to be allies in the drive to end systemic racism. But tell us, Dianndra Roberts, what you think these allies should be doing now, today, in 2023.

ROBERTS: I’ll speak on that in terms of racism. In 2023, allies – we need to be dismantling systemic oppression. And I know, wow, that’s a lot. It is. I’m not going to disagree. And there’s so much that can be done on that. But we need to talk about the sort of hierarchy of restorative justice. Where do you sit within that, and how are you bringing somebody up behind you? It’s easy to say, oh, you know, I don’t have any privilege. Everybody has some somewhere. Even I do. And I know when I get into rooms, it’s for me to bring the next person in, to open that door as long as possible so more and more people can get in. If I’m given a platform, I will be sharing that platform. And the more people that do that, the more we’re going to break down the system that’s trying to keep people out of it.

And if you’re somebody who sits at the top of the hierarchy, you need to be doing way more than the people who are towards the bottom. At the moment, it’s the people towards the bottom who are doing most of the work. If that’s all it took, we would have just done this already. But we’re still here fighting the fight.

So if you’re an ally, and you’re truly like I’m an ally and – yeah, OK, then you need to break down the privilege you have and use it to benefit other people, but also you need to be in a position where you’re going to be like, OK, if this is going the way things are going in terms of equity, I’m going to start having less and less privilege. Well, not even less, actually. I don’t even think that’s actually fair. It’s just other people are going to have as
much as you, so it’s going to feel like you’re having less. But you’re not. We’re just getting the foot up to where you’re at. So even then, in my own thinking, I have to reword how I’m saying things. Because it’s not actually you getting less privilege. You will have the same. What we want is everybody else to have the same.

So you need to do the work to make sure you’re dismantling those systems. I can’t speak on what that means for everybody. It might even mean this policy that really benefits me – I can tell actually it’s not inclusive. It’s policies to do with hair in workplaces or anything that’s sort of an unconscious bias or just a general bias, because at this point, I think we all sort of know the biases that are happening.

Hair, makeup – the other day on TikTok, there was a thing about being un-classy if you use brown lipliner and a nude lipstick, as I am sporting right now, but is culturally a thing for Black women. Most of us have high-pigmented lips anyway. So my face is un-classy, basically. If there’s something that then somebody hears and then goes into, oh, well, for this customer-facing role, you can’t do things like that. That’s naturally taking away from someone’s culture. That’s inherently biasing them at work.

KENNEALLY: In your work at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, you founded the African and Caribbean Forum. You speak regularly on diversity, equity, inclusion, and allyship. What does it mean as a Black woman to speak out against racism in your organization and in this profession? Dianndra, has speaking out made you vulnerable to danger, and how do you respond?

ROBERTS: One of my colleagues, who is Black and is in the events team, put on a mental health sort of seminar which had many different speakers – a majority of them were Black – talking about how mental health has affected Black British people, Black people globally. And the room was filled with Black people.

I think that was one of the first times in my whole career I sat in a room full of scholars and doctors and other professionals, some in publishing, some other areas, and I was like, wow, I’m the majority in this room! And I had just been like – just wow! I was blown away. It was an amazing event, so informative for me, and in that time, I was just like, I’m just really inspired to do something in the workplace. Because again, as much as I’d said earlier this was the first time I’ve worked in a company where I’m not the only Black person, I still didn’t really know any of the other Black people, because we don’t work together. In my team, it’s me.

So I saw it as an opportunity to provide the space for others in the company to get together, to see if there was anything we wanted to do, like how can we provide a voice during Black History Month? Just generally throughout the year – I feel like we should have a
voice throughout the year, not just Black History Month. But if we’re in an organization that’s going to celebrate that time, then allow us to be a part of it and put on our own events and do our own informational things and such. We’ve done webinars and information leaflets and fun things. I don’t know if you know “Desert Island Discs.” It’s a radio show. Yeah, we did our own version of that.

I’m not going to say it was easy, and everything we wanted went the way we wanted it to go, or it didn’t take work. Because for some part – just to say it as it is, when a group of Black people start to organize, it immediately becomes considered political, even if we just wanted to be able to do peer support with each other, and we were not trying to riot or anything. But naturally, somehow, a group of Black people is a political thing –

I’ve been in other places where I’ve spoken up, and I’ve been shouted at. I’ve been honestly humiliated in spaces. I’ve been made an example of. I’ve been penalized in ways that probably shouldn’t have happened, because it shouldn’t have to affect my career, but it has. I would do it again, because I believe in what I stand for, and I think that we should all be treated well and with the same expression. And if me saying anything I’ve said changes it for the person behind me, then yeah, I’m going to keep doing it. I’m just going to keep doing that.

But one thing that I have learnt for myself is that if you’re in a space – you’ve been invited to a space, or you’ve found yourself into the space where you’re being told you’re welcomed, but your voice is not welcome, it’s OK to leave. And it was seeing somebody else more senior to me who’s also Black remove themselves from a space – a really big space where they were given a really solid platform, but it was kind of just in name and not in nature, and they were there to say, hey, look who we’ve got here, so obviously we’re doing the right things, whilst it was just blockade after blockade. That encouraged me to say, actually, these spaces that I’ve been put into are just exhausting me. We’re not moving forward. We’re not taking anything on. And I’m just being put out to say, look at this person that we have. Walk away from those spaces, because they’re not serving you, and they’re not actually for change.

But if you find you can speak up – and speaking up isn’t always literally opening your mouth. Sometimes, it’s writing a letter, leaving a suggestion, talking to someone more senior than you that you feel you can talk to. If it’s not that, sometimes just send the email and be like, well, I’ve done it now. It’s in writing, at least.

And know your rights as well. Know where you stand. Know what you can be penalized for and what you can’t be penalized for.
KENNEALLY: Dianndra Roberts, senior publishing coordinator for the Royal College of Psychiatrists and chef for SSP’s The Scholarly Kitchen blog, thank you for speaking with me and for sharing your experiences with my audience.

ROBERTS: Thank you for having me.

KENNEALLY: That’s all for now. Our producer is Rob Simon 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. Thanks for joining me.

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