

Open Minds ... from Creative Commons

Episode 1: Catherine Stihler of Creative Commons

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[Music: "Day Bird" by Broke for Free]

Eric Steuer: Welcome to the first episode of *Open Minds*, a podcast from Creative Commons. If you're new to Creative Commons (or CC, as we call it), we're a non-profit organization that works globally to build and sustain a thriving commons of shared knowledge and culture. We work with partners all around the world to make information, creativity, research, and educational resources open and accessible to everyone without legal barriers. We're especially focused on sharing and openness that positively impact people and their communities. It's CC's 20th anniversary this year, and to celebrate, we decided to launch this podcast, a series of conversations with people working on the issues we're involved with and excited about. That includes open culture, open education, open science, and open technology. We'll be bringing on folks with interesting ideas to share about sharing. My name's Eric Steuer. I'm CC's Creative Director, and I'll be one of the voices you'll hear on the show. You'll also hear from several of my colleagues. We'll be sharing hosting and interview duties. For our debut episode, I talk to Catherine Stihler, who is Creative Commons' CEO. Catherine started at CC in 2020 after many years as a member of the European Parliament for Scotland and then, more recently, as the CEO of the Open Knowledge Foundation. It seemed like a good place to start for this podcast, hearing from CC's new leader about her career and her vision for what's next for the Creative Commons movement. I hope you enjoy the conversation, and if you've got ideas for people we should be talking to on this show, send us a note: info@creativecommons.org. And now, Catherine Stihler.

[Music: "Day Bird" by Broke for Free]

Like all of us, you didn't start your career in this space because it's still a relatively new space, so can we talk about where you did start your career?

Catherine Stihler: Sure, so I started my career in politics. I don't think I ever thought I would ever be a politician, but in 1999, I was elected to serve Scotland in the European Parliament,

and I held that position for 20 years. Before that, I actually worked in the House of Commons for the first wheelchair-using member of the British Parliament, Dame Anne Begg, which was an incredible experience to work there, too. So politics was something that I never thought I would be elected to, and therefore it was a bit of a surprise to some of my family and friends. I ended up being a politician for so long, Eric.

Eric Steuer: From there, how did you get interested in the kinds of work that you've been doing for the last couple years?

Catherine Stihler: In the European Parliament, I was Vice Chair of the Single Market Committee, and in that capacity, I worked on digital policy and became what's called the Rapporteur (that's just the MEP responsible for a piece of law), and I was responsible for copyright, and it was through that journey in copyright that I became familiar with Creative Commons, but also could see the unfairness, the inequity, the power dynamics, and I wanted to have reformed copyright rules at the European Union level and fought very hard for those. Sadly, on many levels, we didn't achieve that, and that was a lesson learned. I also was involved in the book famine work which was led by the European Blind Union and other organizations fighting for blind and visually impaired people, and that got me interested in e-books. And so I actually ran a campaign called the Open Knowledge campaign, which little did I know that that would be what I'd be working in seven, eight years later, when I was working in that, and it got me interested in issues around inequity, access to knowledge, and the unfairness that I could see and the injustices that I could see that were affecting individuals and communities.

Eric Steuer: What did that Open Knowledge campaign, what did it consist of? Was it sort of an awareness campaign?

Catherine Stihler: Yeah, so it was actually really interesting, because all... It came about from, as you say, the work I was doing about, to do with the book famine that was attached to the Marrakesh Treaty, what they were doing to try and make sure that people who were blind and visually impaired had access to the same books and knowledge that we took for granted, and sadly, at that point, and there's still much to do in this space, there was huge challenges to overcome. But then it got me interested about how, about e-book lending in public libraries, and for some reason in Scotland, one particular local authority was doing superbly well in terms of e-book lending, and it wasn't the local authority. It was one in a very, very poor area. Turned out the person that was the key librarian happened to be really interested in technology, was really versed with new ways of thinking, and so really revolutionized the library system in this particular local area. He actually was head-hunted for another local

area, and it made me think, “Well, if they can do this and make sure people have access, then why is this not happening in other places?” And it then became the situation where you start to understand about how licences are important, about decision-making at local areas and who gets access to what, was not very equitable, and therefore our campaign was to make sure that everyone in Scotland had the same e-book access across the country. It was still a campaign I was, you know, still very interested in, but there was clearly politics attached to that, but also the way the publishers had so much power over libraries, and so it's my attachment to public libraries and the need that we support public libraries in our communities as places and spaces for people to access knowledge and culture regardless of income became even more important. I live in Dunfermline, which is where Andrew Carnegie was born, and in fact, we have the first Carnegie library in Dunfermline, above every Carnegie library, the words “Let there be light,” not just the light of knowledge, but the light of public spaces. And I think to this day, we still live with that legacy of the importance of libraries that Carnegie led with but which we still benefit to today.

Eric Steuer: Were libraries a big part of your life growing up?

Catherine Stihler: Yeah, and my mum and dad were both teachers, and my grandmother had to go and work when she was 14 because her father passed away and the family had very little money, and so my gran was very much about, you know, the importance of education, the importance of knowledge and, you know, to really, really value learning, and although my gran left school without qualifications and worked in a grocery shop, she was one of the most literate people I've ever met. In fact, my husband, who is from California, met my grandmother and was talking to him and found out that he had, you know — at that point his parents were living in Salinas — she could quote John Steinbeck directly to my husband, who was quite shocked that this granny in East Kilbride was able to quote texts from John Steinbeck that he couldn't even quote, so it's important that we value culture and knowledge, and I had that from a very early age.

Eric Steuer: What excited you about coming to work with us here at Creative Commons at this point in your career?

Catherine Stihler: Well, it's a number of things. I think that Creative Commons, for me, is giving practical solutions to some of the thorny problems that I faced as a lawmaker in copyright, so that was one aspect. It was also the global community that was attached to Creative Commons and also the culture, the public-minded public interest openness that is Creative Commons that... I don't know of any other organization, I think, you know, this... Some of them make cookies after they've been in a training session over a CC certificate,

would create CC-branded cookies for the person that was the trainer, and, you know, and that's just a tiny aspect of the generosity, the giving, that is part of this movement, and it's such an honor and privilege to not just be part of this community now, but also to lead the community.

Eric Steuer: We recently had the Creative Commons Summit, our annual event. This year, we obviously did it a bit differently and did a virtual event, but it was, you know, I think, a big success. What did you learn from meeting people at that event, and what were some of your impressions of the kinds of things that people were discussing?

Catherine Stihler: So at the summit, I was struck by the number of people who were part of the conversation, the fact that because it was our first virtual summit, and although, you know, our in-person summits are so important, that actually our first virtual summit allowed more people than ever before to engage with us in ways which, you know, that was not possible when it was an in-person event. I also thought the diversity of those involved in terms of where people come in, you know, come into the conversations from their different perspectives, the fact that we've got this global community working to try and open knowledge and culture at local levels is so important because it's — and also, this the summit is very much community-driven, so it was really fulfilling the needs in a more local and attuned way to be able to address the concerns and the passions of the people who we value most, which is our community and our network.

Eric Steuer: You took on a big project, right, when you got to Creative Commons, and that was to put together a new strategy for the organization. I did want to ask you why that was important to you to do as one of the first things you did at the organization.

Catherine Stihler: I think that for me, the kind of, as I applied for the role and was appointed and then was talking to different stakeholders, the key issue that came through from all these different conversations was that the organization really needed to have, needs to have focus, and so the opportunity to come in in August when I started and drive a strategic process through to make sure it was approved by our December board meeting was no mean task. It was a challenge, shall we say, but the right challenge, because we needed to be reflective of the fact that our world has changed. We're coming up to our 20th anniversary, another point of reflection, and so we needed to be able to think about the past 20 years, but also think about the moment that we're in. And, you know, I always use this quote about: What is ours to do today? What is the purpose of the organization at this moment, and what is the change in the world that we want to work towards? And so in doing that from the get-go, we can enter into our 20th anniversary year with a clear direction of travel strategically outlined in

terms of what we want to see in terms of that better sharing and a world where knowledge and culture is equitably shared in ways that serve the public interest and the fact that we've really emphasized the work that we do is in the public interest is so important in the world that we're in today.

Eric Steuer: You mentioned the phrase “better sharing.” Can you just touch on what that means?

Catherine Stihler: So we've always said at Creative Commons, and absolutely rightly so, that part of our world is about sharing, but we know that what we talked about and sharing 20 years ago is different in the world that we are in today, and so although we are true to our core about the importance of sharing and how that's part of our DNA, we know that in the next 5, 10, 20 years, what we want to see is better sharing, because we see in our world today some of the negativity around some aspects of sharing which we cannot ignore as a mature organization. So in our strategy, we've been very mature, we've looked at where our strengths are, which is about sharing, and that's something that's so important, it goes so much to the heart of what we are as human beings, but we also want to see how we can do that better and we see how social media has allowed us to share more than ever before, but some of that sharing, and we sit in a week where we saw what happened in Washington this week, which was truly shocking in a democracy where things were shared, people believed some of these things, and people died, and so what we want to make sure is that what is at the heart of what we do is to ensure that we share knowledge and culture, but we do this in a way that's responsible.

Eric Steuer: The 20th anniversary is a huge milestone for our organization. How does the strategy set the stage for the next era of Creative Commons?

Catherine Stihler: I believe the strategy allows us to be really focused, and, you know, it's all not... As all global not-for-profits are, we have our vision, but we also have, you know, if we had all the resources that we all wanted, we could do everything, and actually we have to be very focused about the change that we want to have and the areas we feel we've got the most, where we can have the most impact. And moving into the 20th anniversary, it's a moment where we reflect constructively of the achievements that we've made over the past 20 years but clearly outline our vision for the future. And, you know, when Creative Commons was brought together 20 years ago, you know, little did we think we would be in a situation where there would be, you know, the way social media has developed, the way our world is a very different world than it was 20 years ago, and some of the spaces where we publicly share content are not truly public. And so we have to — as an organization and as a movement, as

part of an integrated part of the open ecosystem — have the leadership within the [spaces of 15:20] the solutions that we want to see for the problems we want to solve, which are about many things are closed, and we see how algorithms have a certain impact in our life in a very negative way, and what we want to do in terms of opening up knowledge and culture for everyone everywhere is to ensure that that we have that future that we want to see in a way that serves the public interest.

Eric Steuer: You've mentioned focus a few times. Is there a focus area that you're particularly excited about?

Catherine Stihler: I think... But it will come as no surprise I am very committed to advocacy and ensuring that we have rules that are fit for purpose and are in the public interest, but I also think some of the strengths that we have as Creative Commons is our work with institutions and capacity building. We've seen that with their open education work. We've seen that with our new areas of work in OpenGLAM, and we see that within our chapters and networks working on the ground to be able to open culture and knowledge in communities in ways that it wasn't possible 20 years ago until we came on the scene. So what excites me is the opportunity to open up more culture and knowledge to really enrich that public domain and to ensure more people have access to culture and knowledge regardless of income, race, gender, that we are able to be the people we all want to be in a community and a world community where we have access to culture and knowledge that is not kept behind a paywall, that's been able to be access for all.

Eric Steuer: How can people who are interested in this work support that vision that you just described?

Catherine Stihler: You know, I think there's so many ways people can be part of Creative Commons, whether it's being part of the network, part of our Open Education, GLAM, Copyright Platforms, whether it's coming to Summit and listening into conversations, contributing to conversations, perhaps even, you know, if you've got an idea and you want to be part of the program, you too could be, you know, on that stage. And I think that the community that makes up Creative Commons and the network that makes up Creative Commons is enriched by every individual who makes a contribution, who volunteers of their free time to make that difference in the world opening up culture and knowledge for everyone everywhere, and we know that our job to do in the world today is to ensure that we have better sharing for all that serves the public interest, and that is what is exciting about our job ahead of us.

Eric Steuer: Well, Catherine, thank you so much. I always enjoy talking to you, and today was no exception.

Catherine Stihler: Thank you, Eric. Lovely to speak to you, too.

[Music: "Day Bird" by Broke for Free]

Eric Steuer: Thanks for listening to *Open Minds ... from Creative Commons*. Special thanks to the musician Broke For Free, whose track "Day Bird" you heard at the beginning of this episode and you're listening to right now. It's available under the Creative Commons Attribution license, meaning it's free for anyone to use. You can find it at the Free Music Archive, freemusicarchive.org. Please subscribe to our show so you don't miss any of our conversations with people working to make the internet and our global culture more open and collaborative. We'll be back soon with another episode. Talk to you then.

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