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Volume Editor Vicki Mayer

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# Whither the Professional Book Publisher in an Era of Distribution on Demand

Laura J. Miller

## ABSTRACT

This chapter examines changing organizational, economic, and cultural practices of book production by analyzing the breakdown of several once firm distinctions in the book industry: between production and distribution; between professional publishing and self-publishing; and between amateur and commercial authorship. The development of online storefronts that sell physical books, electronic devices that make it possible to read digital books, and a focus on content as intellectual property that can be detached from form have made it easier than in the past to bypass professional publishers and their traditional roles as gatekeepers, editors, and coordinators of the book production process. The result has been a huge increase in self-publishing, a phenomenon facilitated by for-profit companies that provide a mechanism for distributing these books. The argument is made that the growth of self-publishing reinforces a shift in power relations within the book industry, from publishers to distributors, and helps to make authorship into a recreational choice that can be purchased.

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Prophesying the end of the book, a perennial pastime ever since the advent of television, has intensified in recent years. For decades, observers had warned that young people do not choose to read, being too distracted by other, primarily electronic, diversions that eat into what little unscheduled time they have left. But now we are hearing that adults, too, are giving up on books, at least of the print variety (Birkerts, 1994; National Endowment for the Arts, 2004, 2007, 2009; Scholastic & Harrison Group, 2010). Along with the continued demise of bookstores, the explosion of devices that allow book-related content to be read in digital form, from dedicated e-readers to smart phone apps, seems to signal that the nearly six-century reign of the printed book form as a dominant medium of communication is coming to a rapid end (Gomez, 2008; Siegler, 2010; Weeks, 2000).

Despite some very real changes in book-consumption habits, pronouncements about the death of the printed book are highly overdrawn. After all, by the middle of 2011, only approximately 14% of books sold in the United States were electronic books (Milliot, 2011). And, as is frequently noted, the printed book, as a piece of technology, has many advantages. It does not need electricity. You can drop it or dirty it without impairing its functionality. Entry costs are low. One can flip back and forth rapidly between pages. And, once purchased, it is fungible in ways that most e-books presently are not. But, more than simply being a piece of hyperbole, attention to the health of print diverts us from equally (if not more) important changes taking place in the world of books. Instead of a single-minded focus on technological form, we should also be looking at what is happening to the process of production. That is, in what ways are the organizational, economic, and cultural practices associated with book production changing? We may not be seeing the end of the book, but are we witnessing the death of the publisher?

This chapter approaches the two questions formulated above by examining the breakdown of several once firm distinctions in the book industry: between production and distribution, between professional publishing and self-publishing, and between amateur and commercial authorship. From the nineteenth century right up until the early twenty-first century, the typical structure in the book industry included a division of labor whereby the publisher acted as the master coordinator, acquiring manuscripts from authors, arranging for them to be manufactured by printers, and determining availability to booksellers, who then sold books to the public. As such, publishers not only acted as gatekeepers who decided what works would get published and what would remain locked away in a would-be author's drawer, but publishers were also responsible for editing, design, publicity, and pricing. The costs of such basic tasks as typesetting and warehousing books, and the sheer complexity involved in navigating a system where, by the middle of the twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of unique titles competed for the attention of geographically scattered book retailers and the reading public, meant that professional publishers were best equipped to oversee and finance the publication process, though not without a considerable degree of inefficiency.

However, the development of different mechanisms for producing, distributing, and receiving books has destabilized this publisher-centered system. Many of these

developments are not entirely new. Desktop publishing, which arrived in the 1980s (Henry, 2009), allowed anyone with a computer and widely available software programs to do attractive book design, and it helped to fuel a vibrant small press movement. Starting in the 1960s, the growth of major bookstore chains and bookselling mass merchandisers created powerful retailers, who came to exercise considerable influence over their publisher suppliers (Miller, 2006). And, for decades, freelancers made available a wide variety of editorial, marketing, and production services, especially useful for small publishing outfits that could not afford to keep a full complement of specialists in the house (Dessauer, 1974, p. 166; Mogel, 1996, pp. 21–23). But, more recently, online storefronts that sell physical books and electronic devices that make it possible to read digital books have made it easier than in the past to bypass traditional publishers altogether. One result has been a huge increase in self-publishing, which is no longer denigrated as vanity publishing – a phenomenon facilitated by for-profit companies that provide a mechanism for distributing these books.

These developments call into question the role that publishers play: they appear to be rearranging the power dynamics in the book industry. In a rapidly expanding marketplace – where, in 2009, 288,355 new titles and editions from traditional publishers were released in the United States, while over twice as many came from non-traditional sources (primarily print on demand and self-publishing) (“Big Gains for New Players,” 2010) – there are fewer cues for distinguishing the edited from the unedited book, the anointed from the self-appointed. While some see all this as a populist triumph whereby any writer can transition to the status of published author without the permission of established publisher authorities, I want to argue that other for-profit players – some new, some veteran – are consolidating their positions of influence in the competition for readers’ attention and dollars. For, at the same time as we see a lessening of regard for what professional publishers do and heightened cultural approbation for the status of the amateur author, those authors are becoming dependent on professional distributors who act behind the scenes to make works available in an increasingly crowded book arena. Book authorship comes to look similar to book readership, in that both are recreational choices that one can purchase from commercial entrepreneurs. The weakened position of professional publishing may thus transform the way in which the public thinks about books as much as technological developments do.

## **Publisher Organizations and Responsibilities: Twentieth-Century Shifts**

At least until the twenty-first century, the would-be author who produced a manuscript faced a daunting task in getting his book into print. Already established authors whose futures appeared promising might well receive advance payments on little more than an idea pitched to an editor. For the unknown writer, on the other hand, not only were fat advances unlikely, but so was the very possibility of being published.

In 1981 it was estimated that the odds against the publication of novels submitted unsolicited or without the benefit of an agent were 29,998 to 2 (Coser, Kadushin, & Powell, 1985, 132). In their classic study of the American publishing industry, on the basis of research conducted in the 1970s, Coser and his team found that an individual editor received between 1,000 and 5,000 unsolicited submissions each year (p. 129). When measured against the amount of labor it took to go through the “slush pile,” the likelihood of finding something worthwhile was considered so low that most unsolicited manuscripts were never even looked at (Dystel, 1985, p. 335). This still remains the case today.

Instead, during the second half of the twentieth century, the editor came increasingly to rely on literary agents to screen writers for her and to bring to her attention books that fit her press’ profile. Today the majority of published books first come to an editor’s attention via an agent, though securing an agent’s services does not guarantee publication. Augmenting their more obvious duties as dealmakers, agents also gradually took on functions that were once the editor’s exclusive prerogative: advising an author on book ideas and writing style, on the kind of audience to target, and on the progression of a writer’s career. In part, the agent engages in these activities because writers cannot necessarily count on an editor’s long-term guidance. Editors change jobs with great frequency, so that an author not uncommonly finds that an editor who enthusiastically accepted his manuscript for publication does not stay long enough at the publishing house to see the project through to its completion. With such great uncertainty clouding the author–editor relationship, the agent often becomes a welcome and stable mentor. On the flip side, the author–publisher relationship became more formal and contractual over the twentieth century (Berman, 1983; Squires, 2007, pp. 34–35).

In addition to the ways in which editors interact with their authors, there have been other changes to the organization of publishing that undermined the centrality of the editorial function. A key development was the transformation, during the second half of the twentieth century, of the largest publishers from family-owned firms to investor-controlled corporations, which were usually public and often part of diversified conglomerates. Several waves of merger and acquisition activity produced over time a handful of companies that were based primarily in Europe and North America and controlled hundreds of the best known publisher imprints (Greco, Rodríguez, & Wharton, 2007; Luey, 2009; Miller, 2006, 2011; see Table 7.1 for examples of different permutations in publisher ownership). Complaints about commercialization in the book world have been a staple as long as the modern book industry has existed, but they took on an intensified tone in reaction to corporatization. Critics charged that publisher consolidation was leading to an aversion to risk-taking and to a homogenization of book output. Additionally, critics said, publishers overemphasized the promotion of popular blockbusters, with the result that most other books were set up for market failure (Miller, 1997; Schiffrin, 1995; Solotaroff, 1984). For many who worked in publishing, the introduction of more rationalized techniques for managing the business turned what was once a quirky and inefficient

**Table 7.1** Ownership of selected publishing companies, 1980–2010

1980

Publisher	Parent Company
Academic Press	Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich	
Harper & Row	
Little, Brown	Time Inc.
Macmillan Ltd.	
Penguin	Pearson
Random House	RCA
Simon & Schuster	Gulf + Western
South-Western	Scott, Foresman

1990

Publisher	Parent Company
Academic Press	Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich	
HarperCollins	News Corp.
Little, Brown	Time Warner
Macmillan Ltd.	
Penguin	Pearson
Random House	Newhouse
Simon & Schuster	Paramount Communications
South-Western	Thomson

2000

Publisher	Parent Company
Academic Press	Harcourt Inc.
Harcourt Inc.	General Cinema
HarperCollins	News Corp.
Little, Brown	AOL Time Warner
Macmillan Ltd.	Georg von Holtzbrinck
Penguin	Pearson
Random House	Bertelsmann
Simon & Schuster	Viacom
South-Western	Thomson

2010

Publisher	Parent Company	Parent Company's 2009 International Rank by Book Sales ("Pearson Leads the Pack," 2010)
Academic Press	Reed Elsevier	2
HarperCollins	News Corp.	19
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt	Education Media and Publishing Group	14
Little, Brown	Lagardère	6
Macmillan Ltd.	Georg von Holtzbrinck	10
Penguin	Pearson	
Random House	Bertelsmann	5
Simon & Schuster	CBS	27
South-Western	Cengage Learning (Apax Partners/OMERS)	11

but fulfilling line of work into something more modern, but also less enjoyable (Howard, 1989; Schiffrin, 2000).

The 1980s in particular were marked by tremendous discussion and concern about the increased importance, in publishing houses, of marketing and subsidiary rights, some of this debate being prompted by the publication of Thomas Whiteside's *The Blockbuster Complex* in 1981 (Donaldson, 1981; Whiteside, 1981; Woodcock, 1981).<sup>1</sup> Pushed by their corporate parents to pay more systematic attention to revenue streams, publishers appeared to be elevating once secondary departments to equal status with that of editorial divisions. Along with their obvious responsibilities of selling, promotion, and publicity, sales and marketing members of staff are now often consulted on the sales prospects for a book, even when an editor is deciding whether or not to acquire a manuscript. Marketing considerations are also critical in determining the number of copies to be printed, the choice of a title for the book, the quality of art-work to be commissioned, the jacket design, the scheduling of a book's publication, and the setting of the book's price. Thus marketing matters are intimately connected to editorial and production decisions at almost every stage in the book's development. For critics, this has meant that those books and authors with media appeal or with an obvious promotional hook are favored over books that are not so easily marketed. While there is considerable truth to this claim, it does not really address the thornier question of just how publishers should make decisions about the amount of marketing to put into any single title. In a bookselling landscape where there are now over three million books in print in the US alone (R. R. Bowker, LLC, 2011, p. viii), marketing is both essential to helping a book find its audience and self-defeating – in that the cacophony of promotional messages soon overwhelms even the most receptive reader.

Similar concerns about how publishers evaluate and treat manuscripts differentially have been associated with the issue of subsidiary rights. For much of the twentieth century, the typical model in publishing was for manuscripts to be published first in hardcover form. The right to transform the book into another form is considered a subsidiary right and is usually licensed by the original publisher to a different organization. Paperback reprint, book club, foreign and territorial, translation, magazine serialization, film, television, and stage adaptation, audio, and electronic rights have been among the most common kinds of rights. As the value of these rights grew over time, publishers increasingly considered a book's prospects for rights-generated income when doing the original hardcover publication. This not only prompted critics to claim that books without much potential for subsidiary rights were being unpublished or left to languish with no promotional attention, but it also led to a dismantling of the traditional sequence of events, whereby hardcover books are published first, and any other form is subsequent or subsidiary. As it became clear that a paperback original did not need the cachet of a hardcover preceding it, or that a successful children's book series could be created out of a television series, the once automatic association between a book and a standalone hardcover was being dissolved. Content was becoming detached from form.

These various changes were, if not altogether caused, at least facilitated by the connections between publishing and major media conglomerates. However, what is often glossed over in accounts of publisher consolidation is that the various waves of publisher acquisitions were interspersed with periods of divestment, as corporations whose primary purpose was not in book products realized that book publishing both was a low-profit endeavor and operated according to very different traditions from those of their core activities. Indeed, the era of book publishers as subsidiaries of massive media conglomerates seemed to come to an end in the 2000s: Vivendi Universal sold Houghton Mifflin to an investment group consortium in 2002, Time Warner sold the Time Warner Book Group to Groupe Lagadère Media in 2006, and Viacom split off CBS (initially, Columbia Broadcasting System, owner of Simon & Schuster Book Group) also in 2006 (Miller, 2011). These signs of disenchantment with publishing properties were perhaps a foreshadowing of the general value that the market could come to place on traditional publishing.

## The Rise of Self-Publishing

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Whereas the publishing industry appeared to be in a perpetual state of turmoil in the twentieth century, it has faced new challenges in the current century. Most recent studies have framed their analyses of the future of publishing and reading in terms of the digital age and its features, which include the competition and opportunities presented by electronic information and entertainment delivery systems (Cope & Phillips, 2006; Darnton, 2009; Epstein, 2001; Kovač, 2008; Striplas, 2009; Thompson, 2005). I wish to examine these challenges, not by ignoring new technologies – which, as I will discuss, definitely affect all stages, from production to reception – but by considering them alongside two other tendencies: the focus on content as intellectual property that can be detached from form; and the rise of a number of powerful distributors. These tendencies are not unique to the book industry. Fluid interrelationships between technology, distribution, and intellectual property have affected all communication industries, from recorded music to television to film to newspapers (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006; Gillespie, 2007; Hesmondhalgh, 2002). But, because of different cultural traditions in the production and reception of these various media, the ways in which they have been impacted by recent developments are not uniform.

The specific case I use to discuss these developments is the extraordinary growth and cultural legitimation of self-publishing. Not so long ago, self-publishing was generally called vanity publishing: a telling name, in that the notion of paying for one's writings to be published, regardless of their merit, was seen as an act of pure vanity. In recognition of the social stigma that accompanied vanity publishing, most firms that made it possible operated with discretion, giving a book all the trappings of having been acquired by what was considered truly legitimate publishers. Of course, well before the current era, the line between legitimate and vanity publishing was



never perfectly clear. For instance, the not uncommon practice of scholarly publishers favoring a subvention – a subsidy that an author, or an author’s institution, brings to defray the costs of production – has meant that those authors with access to such funds could have an edge in getting published, though books still have to go through the usual channels of evaluation before a contract is offered (Horowitz, 1991, p. 170; Powell, 1985, pp. 185, 230). Similarly, many a small press has successfully begun with a publisher–author’s own book as the centerpiece of the new list. In other cases religious, political, and voluntary bodies simply found it easier to self-publish works that were primarily meant for their own constituents’ consumption than to find a separate press, which was willing to work with them on their terms. All such cases cast doubt on the somewhat sanctimonious ideal of an objective publisher, who dispassionately evaluates the merits of a manuscript and who profits only when an independent book-buying audience endorses his or her judgment about a book’s worthiness. Nonetheless, despite the dubious proposition that regular publishing was synonymous with a meritocracy, those other publishers who accepted any and all comers for a price and those authors who availed themselves of this opportunity were recognized by both the book industry and the reading public as different and as subject to disdain.

What kept this distinction between regular publishing and self-publishing vital was a combination of two things. First there were ideas about the legitimacy of cultural authorities in the form of professional publishers, who were granted the exclusive right to make determinations about the quality (in terms of both literary and commercial values) of manuscripts. And second there was a considerable consensus about the indicators of being a certified published author. This not only entailed the physical properties of a properly printed and bound book, but it also included the ability for readers to purchase the book. And, for that, it was almost essential to engage with a professional publisher, someone who knew how to “announce” the book, for instance by securing an International Standard Book Number (ISBN) or by sending catalogs to key intermediaries who could publicize a title to the book-buying public. It was the professional publisher who could convince booksellers – whose limited bookshelf space required them to exclude most available books – to carry a given title.

Today, however, these conventions regarding the designation of a published book are breaking down, as the options for manufacturing, publicizing, and distributing books have grown more numerous. Such conventions have been loosened in a number of ways. The physical form of a book is no longer synonymous with a printed and bound codex of a standard length. Content that was created for other purposes – for instance a blog, a wiki, the back story of a video game – can now be readily transferred into book form. Moreover, individuals and organizations other than traditional publishers may control and coordinate those steps taken to make a book available to the public. An important catalyst for undermining consensus on what constitutes a published book has been a number of new technologies that affect each stage in the process of getting a book from author to reader.

Among the more significant changes in manufacturing is print on demand (POD), developed in the 1990s, which replaces offset printing with digital printing technolo-

gies. In offset lithography, printing is done from plates, which hold the image that is to be printed onto sheets of paper. This process produces consistently high-quality printing, but it is also expensive to prepare and make the plates. For that reason, the higher the print run, the more units there are across which costs can be distributed (Henry, 2009). Very small print runs are simply not cost efficient. But when one prints directly from a digital file, as POD does, it is feasible to print even a single copy – hence the phrase *print on demand*. Printing only when a copy is requested by a buyer can also save producers money, because there is no excess stock to be housed in expensive warehouse space for years on end. As the quality of digital printing has improved dramatically, book readers are less likely as much as to notice its difference from offset printing.

While POD can be used for short-run jobs of traditionally published new books, in practice it has primarily been used in three ways. First, publishers will reprint a small number of an out-of-stock book for which they do not anticipate sufficient demand to justify a full reprinting. The second use is to publish inexpensively small runs of books in the public domain – a way for POD companies to sell directly to consumers without becoming full-fledged publishers who acquire and edit new material. And, third, POD is a boon to self-publishing, as authors do not have to pay for an extremely expensive printing job to produce books that may be distributed no further than one's small circle of friends and family.

With each of these uses, the impact of POD has also been to make traditional publishers less central to the publication process. Some of the earliest ventures to commercialize POD services were started by the major wholesalers in the book industry, Baker & Taylor and Ingram. Unlike publishers of the time, these wholesalers invested in the equipment that produces POD books and that could convert older titles to a digital format (“Update on Printing-on-Demand,” 1998). The advantage, for both publishers and booksellers, of working with Ingram or with Baker & Taylor was that these already had in place systems for ordering delivery of books from the wholesalers. POD services became even more decentralized with various “book machines” – the name given to POD devices that can print, bind, and trim books and that, theoretically, can be set up anywhere. While at one time there was speculation that these devices could become as mundane as a vending machine, the expense of purchase and the difficulty of maintaining them in working order have limited their spread. Nonetheless, some bookstores have acquired one such machine, which makes it possible for a bookstore to be a center of book production as well as of book consumption. Booksellers have found that much of the customer demand for these machines comes from writers who print their own manuscripts (Mayersohn, 2011; Rosen, 2006).

While some bookstores have experimented with this kind of book manufacturing, the very definition of bookselling has been complicated in other ways by digital distributors. In the mid-1990s, entrepreneurs, some with no previous bookselling experience, began selling books online. The major player, of course, was Amazon.com, which became a significant presence in bookselling markets around the globe.

However, anyone with a website, packing materials, and access to books to sell can set oneself up as an online bookseller, utilizing the postal service or a private delivery company to get physical books into the hands of readers who purchase them. Although there is indeed a multitude of very small operators trying to sell books – especially used ones – out of their own homes, more developed online businesses rely heavily on wholesalers to warehouse books and fill orders. Amazon is an exception to this; because of the volume of its sales, it maintains its own set of warehouses.

The effects of online bookselling in the field have been multifaceted, but a few in particular bear mentioning here. To begin with, the growth of Amazon contributed to the decline of independent bookstores and to the concentration of clout around a small number of businesses involved in bookselling. In addition to Amazon, this group included Barnes & Noble, Borders (which went out of business in 2011), and Wal-Mart in the US; Waterstone's, Tesco, and Asda in the UK; DBH and Thalia in Germany; and Fnac in France and elsewhere in Europe. Because they are responsible for such a large portion of book sales, these retailers have been able to wield considerable influence over publishers, which is manifest in everything – from the terms according to which publishers sell books to them to marketing plans for a given title. Even when publishers feel taken advantage of, they can rarely afford to alienate their biggest customers. Thus publishers' relative power in the industry has diminished as that of the major retailers and distributors have grown.

Second, online bookselling makes it theoretically possible to sell an unlimited number of titles, since what browsing customers see is a listing of books, not the actual books themselves. It should not be forgotten that the capability to purchase any book in print was available before the Internet came on the scene, as booksellers kept copies of the reference works that listed all books in print available in the store for their own and their customers' use. Many bookshops would order for a customer any book that they do not already carry (most still do this). However, consumers have not always been aware of this service, and the ability to instantly call up titles on one's home computer screen, without a human bookseller acting as an intermediary, contributes to the sense of plenitude that online bookselling brings. It can make the physical limitations of bookstores seem like an unnecessary impediment to consumer choice.

Finally, and connected to this, without the scarcity issue presented by the simple impossibility of a physical bookstore housing all the available titles, self-published books that formerly would never have had a chance of being displayed in a bookshop can easily be included in an online bookseller's database. This makes it at least possible for such books to reach a wide audience. But doing away with limitations on the number of titles that an online bookseller "carries" does not do away with limitations on consumers' patience for sorting through the massive quantity of books vying for their attention. Nor does online shopping do away with the fact that Internet booksellers with large databases still make choices about which titles will feature in prominent ways on their web pages and which titles will come to a reader's

attention only if she conducts the exact right search (Miller, 1999). As a consequence, booksellers like Amazon have realized that there are revenue streams to be tapped by allowing publishers to purchase advantageous placements on the website.

Along with changing manufacturing and retailing, digital technology has also provided new options for book reception. The first attempt to find a mass audience for electronic books emerged in the late 1990s, when several dedicated e-book reading devices started to come on the market, and numerous new companies and subsidiaries of existing companies tried to provide a means for making content available. However, while greatly hyped in the early days, most of these ventures did not last for long. Readers showed little interest – not only in paying for e-books, but in reading them at all. This was underscored by one of the most highly publicized early efforts to encourage e-book reading: the exclusive electronic publication, in 2000, of popular horror writer Stephen King's novella *Riding the Bullet*. Hundreds of thousands of people did download it, but there was quite an incentive to do so, since the e-book was initially available free of charge (Scott, 2000). On the other hand, it was estimated that only 20% of the downloaders actually read the book ("E-Books: Not Ready for Prime Time?" 2000). King ended up discontinuing his second experiment with e-books, *The Plant*, which bypassed regular publishers and was instead released in serialized installments on King's own website. By the fifth installment, downloads were down to one third of the number of the first installment, and fewer than half of those readers were making the voluntary one-dollar payment that King had requested for each download (Kirkpatrick, 2000; Reid, 2000). The aborted experiment suggested that even the most popular authors needed the marketing assistance of professional publishers, and that authors used to being paid handsomely for their work were not going to sit by passively and watch downloaders become freeloaders.

By 2001 e-books looked to be on their way out. In response to poor sales, e-book companies shut down, publishers discontinued e-book imprints, and booksellers stopped selling them (Milliot & Reid, 2002; Reid & Holt, 2003). As digitization was proceeding in other parts of the book business, though, research on electronic reader technology continued as well. By 2005 there were signs of an e-book revival, though its future still appeared tentative until 2007; that year Amazon introduced the Kindle, which provided a reading experience much improved over that of the previous generation of e-book devices. Other companies soon followed with their own e-book readers, and Sony, Barnes & Noble, and Apple joined Amazon as market leaders. At the same time, e-books that could be read on a regular computer or on a smart phone were also being made available. The result was a confusing landscape of businesses, some selling e-books in various formats, some selling e-book readers, and some selling both, while publishers who held the rights to previously published content that could be digitized needed to make individual deals with each company that used a proprietary e-book format. As it appeared that e-books would finally enter the mainstream, publishers also found themselves in disputes with authors and authors' agents about control over electronic rights.

Thus e-books hold out the promise of new sources of revenue to publishers, but they also threaten publishers' standing in the book industry. A major problem that publishers face has to do with the pricing of books. Amazon originally discounted its e-books to a price below the cost of acquiring them from publishers, as it was willing to take a loss in the hopes of convincing more readers to purchase a Kindle and of gaining market share; customers quickly came to see the discounted price as the "real" cost of a book. For consumers, the almost magical ease of digital reproduction contributes to the notion that "information wants to be free" – a phrase originally uttered by Stewart Brand when he described the paradoxical situation whereby information can be expensive because it is so valuable, but also cheap because the costs of dissemination keep declining (Turner, 2006, p. 136). The consequence of focusing solely on the lowered (though hardly absent) costs of distribution is that the costs of production are largely overlooked. Book publishers are now faced with a consuming public suspicious about the price of print and electronic books alike, and less confident that publishers actually do much to justify the prices they charge, especially for hardcover books. The e-book phenomenon, on the other hand, has benefited self-publishing. Not only can self-published authors avoid the costs of printing and shipping physical books, but the efforts of professional publishers look increasingly superfluous to writers and readers alike.

## **Professional Facilitators of Amateur Publishers**

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The development of digital technologies, the ease with which content can travel across various forms, and the decentering of professional publishers in the industry have all therefore aided the growth of self-publishing. But authors are not truly getting books out all by themselves. A number of companies that offer self-publishing services have been established to facilitate this process. The world's largest such company is Author Solutions, which owns AuthorHouse, iUniverse, Xlibris, Trafford Publishing, and Wordclay. Other major players include Lulu and Amazon's CreateSpace. As well as offering an Internet storefront for selling books, these companies present authors with a smorgasbord of services, from line editing, formatting, cover design, and illustration selection, to marketing campaigns and book-signing assistance, to ghostwriting. Authors can choose between electronic and print formats for publication. The mix-and-match nature of these services means that authors can spend as little or as much as they like. In 1982, fees for vanity press publishing in the US ranged between \$3,000 and \$20,000 (McDowell, 1982). In 2010, authors were paying self-publishing companies much less: an average of \$1,000 to \$5,000 (Byle, 2010, p. S8) – though more expensive packages were available. Indeed, it was possible to spend as little as \$100 if an author needed just a single service. Some Internet sites even allowed authors to upload an already prepared e-book for no charge, and then they would simply take a large share of the revenues if copies were sold. As this

indicates, it is possible for authors to do much or all of the production work themselves. But where authors are still in a position of dependence is in the area of distribution and sales.

Of course, the ease with which one can now publish a book does not mean that such books will sell. In 2009, Author Solutions estimated that its published titles sold on average 150 copies (Rich, 2009). For many authors, achieving significant sales is not the point of their endeavors. They may want to make copies available just to friends, family, or business associates, or they may want nothing more than the tangible product of their writing labors that publishing brings. But, for other authors, the hope is that their works will indeed find a larger audience and make the author some money in the process. Recognizing this market of ambitious self-publishers, established booksellers have begun to sell opportunities for exposure, as well as some services similar to those that the self-publishing companies offer. For instance, in 2009, retailer Barnes & Noble acquired Tikatok, an Internet site that, for a price, assists parents and children in publishing their own books ("College Stores, E-Commerce Boost B&N," 2009). The following year Barnes & Noble launched PubIt!, which allows self-published e-books to be sold through Barnes & Noble's Internet store ("B&N to Launch PubIt!" 2010). The program makes one of the largest online booksellers in the world accessible to authors who previously could never have hoped to sell their books there. The catch was that Barnes & Noble would retain 35–60% of the listed price of books sold. This ensured that Barnes & Noble, while doing almost none of the work involved in publishing a book, would profit from those few authors who made real money from their books. Similarly, both Borders and Amazon created programs that offered self-publishing services, marketing support for self-published works, or simply a place on their websites where self-published books could be sold. In this way these booksellers allow for distribution on demand.

The proliferation of commercial services for self-publishing has been accompanied by a remarkably rapid change in the social status of such books. Relatively few of those books are actually being read by people outside of the author's circle of acquaintances. Whether publication is a private affair or something done in the hope of achieving commercial success, self-publishing is more likely to be applauded as a legitimate act of self-expression and less likely to be denigrated as a foolish act of hubris than it was in the past. Signs of changing attitudes can be found even in more traditional sectors of the book industry. Agents are now looking for self-published works that can be transitioned to the professionally published market. Booksellers are changing their policies too. Previously, physical bookstores would rarely consider carrying self-published works, both because of the time and extra labor involved in handling non-traditional publishers and because such works had not been vetted according to traditional standards. But in 2007 Colorado's Boulder Book Store began charging self-published authors a \$25 handling fee to stock a book, and additional fees for other promotional opportunities. The program was considered successful both for the store and for authors, and other independent bookstores began to imitate

it (Rosen, 2010). This represented not only a change in regard for self-published books, but a greater willingness to sell display space in stores to publishers, an issue that has long been a source of debate in the industry.

Even *Publishers Weekly*, the venerable American trade journal of the book industry, has changed its stance towards self-publishing. In 2010 the magazine announced that it would begin issuing a quarterly supplement of self-published titles. Authors could pay a \$149 processing fee to have their titles listed in the supplement. The magazine also said it would review at least 25 of the listed titles in each supplement, promising the chosen authors the kind of exposure that might possibly lift them out of obscurity. On the one hand, this meant a new revenue source (and maybe even new readership) for *Publishers Weekly*. But it also signalled an acknowledgement on the part of the industry establishment that self-published books could actually deserve such exposure.

The book world and the cultural tendencies that support it have come a long way from the time when the amateur seemed ominous rather than admirable. The mass culture tradition of social criticism, with its concerns about centralized authority and the standardization of thought, has frequently resonated with those in the book industry and affiliated institutions.<sup>2</sup> In some strands of this tradition, the triumph of the amateur adds to the cultural crisis of modern society. José Ortega y Gasset (1993), writing in 1930, claimed that the mass no longer recognizes that it takes people with qualifications, and who feel a duty to a higher calling, to participate in intellectual and artistic affairs. The mass now believes instead that anyone can participate in these areas, and that all the ideas, all the opinions, all the efforts are equally valid. For Ortega y Gasset, the result is that mass man becomes smug about his own power; he looks to his own self for answers and thinks it unnecessary to submit to anyone else for judgment (p. 97). But, without standards, Ortega y Gasset says, anything goes; there is no real culture, and barbarism becomes conceivable.

Without adopting Ortega y Gasset's confidence in the superiority of a cultural elite and its standards, one can nevertheless consider critically the social changes that have furthered the sense that professional gatekeepers, who employ their own criteria for selection and in doing so promote an artificial scarcity of creative works, are impeding cultural innovation. In the American book industry, ambivalence about acting as a cultural authority has been present since the middle of the twentieth century; and it was reinforced by a variety of factors, including the influence of corporations interested in vanquishing an image of stuffy elitism, and the entry into the industry of a generation genuinely enthusiastic about popular culture (Miller, 2006, pp. 59–66). The book industry has also been affected by more general cultural forces, which celebrate a democratic access to political power, economic opportunities, and communication media.

However, what we are seeing in the media sector is not the end of an elite, but rather the substitution of the technical expert for the cultural authority. On the one hand, the "information society" is understood to require a technocracy that has the high-level skills not only to produce advances in information technology and in its

applications, but also to assist the rest of the population, which is rendered helpless when machines or systems malfunction. On the other hand, this dependence on a technocracy is accompanied by a reverence for the plucky amateur, who utilizes this technology, sometimes in illicit ways, as a means to practice creativity and mastery. This attitude includes admiration for hackers, who crack the computer codes that professionals created in order to keep unauthorized users out, as well as for self-taught video-makers, who load their creations on YouTube. Henry Jenkins (2008, pp. 2–3) has argued that we are seeing a convergence culture, where content flows across different media platforms, which helps give rise to a participatory culture where media consumers, far from being passive spectators, actively participate in the convergence process (see also Deuze, 2007). Others speak of the “prosumer,” someone who produces new media content through consuming existing material and the tools made available by digital technologies (Collins, 2010). In each of these models, the lines between producer and consumer, and between different forms of media, are blurred.

The field of self-publishing can certainly be seen as an example of this joining together of production and consumption, and of print and digital media. But the growth of self-publishing is about more than just providing a creative outlet for writers. In contrast to how things are in film, television, or even music, the technical requirements for producing a few copies of a manuscript that could be easily read, even if they did not look very elegant, have been within reach of amateurs for decades. In contrast, the self-publishing *industry* is premised on the desire of the amateur to reach a potentially large audience and to profit through one’s writings. In this way it differs from, for instance, the DIY (do-it-yourself) philosophy of punk, which is about the celebration of an amateur aesthetics and of a principled lack of interest in reaching a mass audience (e.g., Green & Taormino, 1997). Whereas DIY turns on its head the usual hierarchy of professional over amateur, the self-publishing industry collapses the professional–amateur distinction, on the promise that one no longer needs the insider knowledge and skills of the professional to be a commercial success. Of course, aside from a tiny fraction of writers, the only ones making any profit in this arena are the commercial services themselves.

## The Persisting Professional Publisher

The self-publishing phenomenon raises questions about whether the tasks performed by professional publishers are economically sustainable, or even necessary. Writers and readers bewildered by the length of the time it takes for a manuscript to go through the regular publishing process, and angered by the rising prices of such books, harbor doubts about the value of professional publishers. It is not only the burgeoning self-publishing movement that has caused this loss of esteem for publishers. The spate of scandals involving author deceptions – from James Frey’s not-so-true



life memoir to Kaavya Viswanathan's inclusion in her novel of passages from other authors' works, to Charles Pellegrino's use of erroneous facts in his nonfiction, to Greg Mortenson's misrepresentation of his life and charitable works – have undermined the public's faith that publishers provide a crucial mediating role.<sup>3</sup> All of these deceptive authors were heavily promoted by major publishing houses. If such publishers cannot fact-check, recognize plagiarism, or investigate an author's suspicious identity claims, then readers wonder what exactly they are doing.

In actuality, publishers do engage in at least some fact-checking and flag possible problems in an author's work. Publishing houses still work with authors to craft a book so that it meets prevailing literary standards, though these standards may vary depending on what audience an author and her editor have in mind. As one publisher notes:

Wherever ideas originate, they are often simply the starting point on the long road to a finished book, which typically includes extended conversations and conceptual discussions between author and editor about how the material might best be structured, the project's ideal parameters (knowing what to leave out is often an editor's key contribution), how much background is necessary for lay readers to grasp an argument, and so forth. Manuscripts that arrived in "finished" form typically require at least a line edit and a copy edit to maximize the impact of the underlying ideas, to make them coherent and a pleasure to read. (Wachtell, 2010, p. B11)

In other words, professional publishers help authors to communicate. They act as the "support personnel" that belie the image of an individual artist who creates and communicates in isolation (Becker, 1982, 77).

As an alternative to professional publishing, self-publishing is indeed a cheap and widely accessible way for authors to produce books. But it generally comes at the cost of minimal editing and proofreading, the absence of an index and guide to sources, and probably no fact-checking at all. For some readers, this may not matter. But, for others, in a society where so many sources of information and entertainment vie with books for people's time, such qualities may matter more than ever. Moreover, self-publishing does not do away with support personnel altogether. At a minimum, it involves the assistance of skilled distributors.

Indeed, pushing aside professional publishers as gatekeepers does not eliminate the gates themselves. There are millions of potential books available, and readers, by necessity, have to find some way of figuring out which ones to pay attention to. That task is not so straightforward when the gates that determine which manuscripts have a chance of reaching an audience are more inclusive than ever. For instance, readers have been confounded by organizations such as VDM Publishing Group (originally, Verlag Dr. Müller) and its Alphascript, Betascript, and Fastbook imprints. This group has published tens of thousands of books, many of which are simply brief reproductions of Wikipedia material, sold at hefty prices on Amazon and other sites offering self-published books. Internet discussion lists have been filled with stories of dismayed buyers (including at least one university library) who discovered

that the book that had such an impressive title was little more than a snapshot of a web page. As this shows, the ability to simply present a title in an authoritative way can attract buyers. Readers do employ other criteria when selecting books. Word of mouth matters considerably. And there are many industrious volunteers who read everything they can, and then post reviews and recommendations; some of these amateur reviewers gain a real following. But it is still those authors who pay for the assistance of professional marketers and distributors who get the best results. In this way self-publishing does not look that different from vanity publishing.

What has also not changed is that reading is still an activity regularly practiced by a relatively small number of people. As Griswold (2008) notes, a large reading class flourished for only a brief period of time in parts of Europe, North America, and Japan. She argues that, while we are not likely to return to a situation where the majority of a population reads extensively for pleasure, a small elite will continue to do so and will retain a disproportionate cultural influence. Self-publishing does not change this; it is not the case that the existence of more reading options automatically leads to more reading. Rather, time-use studies suggest that reading in general, and especially reading by men, has not increased in recent years (Eurostat, 2004; Sweden Statistics, 2010; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, annual).

In answer to my original question, professional publishers are not going away, despite their fading dominance in the book world. Instead, what we may be seeing is the emergence of a two-tiered system in which the truly popular books and the authors committed to traditional standards go with professionals, and large numbers of amateur publishers see their books produced but not widely read. As an industry journalist noted: "Self-publishing is not considered a particularly attractive option for bestselling authors used to large advances and the marketing, promotion, and distribution provided by publishers" (Deahl, 2010, p. 7). Nor is it so appealing to authors who rely on the editorial assistance and stamp of approval of professionals in order to gain critical recognition. In many ways self-publishing is a positive development, as writers who do not have the savvy or the audience appeal to attract a professional publisher can now maybe reach those readers who are actually interested in what they have to say. But self-publishing also makes a readership largely irrelevant. One can produce a published book whether or not anyone cares about its contents. In this way our understanding of what a book is all about – of its very purpose, and not just of its technological form – becomes something up for grabs.

## NOTES

- 1 Thomas Whiteside's *The Blockbuster Complex: Conglomerates, Show Business, and Book Publishing*, which originally appeared in 1980 as a series of articles in *The New Yorker*, castigated the trend toward bigness in the book industry. Whiteside argued that, since the 1960s, corporate consolidations produced ever larger publishing houses that focused on creating mega-selling blockbusters, on giving huge advances to star authors, and on

promoting books through movie and television tie-ins. *The Blockbuster Complex* was widely reviewed, both in the trade and in the popular press.

- 2 The mass culture perspective is related to mass society theory (e.g., Arendt, 1973), which posits a set of social transformations that occurs when people no longer live in traditional communities, but instead become part of an undifferentiated mass with no meaningful common interests and with no obligations or commitment toward any particular group. In mass society people become vulnerable to manipulation by authoritarian leaders and impersonal institutions. The mass culture perspective has been associated with a range of thinkers, including F. R. Leavis (1930), Dwight Macdonald (1960), and members of the Frankfurt School such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1989) or Leo Lowenthal (1961). In this view, culture is increasingly produced and disseminated by rationalized businesses, which are out primarily to make a profit. Despite surface differences, mass culture is seen as essentially standardized and formulaic; it lacks authenticity, depth, or originality; it affirms the existing organization of society and social relations; and it acts like a narcotic that saps the sense of autonomy in the audience, together with any capacity for serious thinking. In the end mass culture absorbs and diffuses resistance in society.
- 3 In 2003 James Frey published *A Million Little Pieces*, which was, supposedly, an account of his often harrowing experiences with addiction. The book, initially published by Doubleday, was a tremendous bestseller and had a notable endorsement by Oprah Winfrey. In 2006 it was exposed as having a considerable number of fabricated incidents. In that same year Kaavya Viswanathan published *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life*, a novel she had penned while still in high school. Viswanathan had worked with the book packager, Alloy Entertainment, which began as a marketing company, helping advertisers reach youth. The novel received great attention, partly because of Viswanathan's age and status as a Harvard University student. After publication, the book was found to have multiple plagiarized passages from a number of different writers, including Megan McCafferty. Charles Pellegrino published a number of books of history from the 1980s through to the 2000s. After publication, sales of his 2010 book *The Last Train from Hiroshima* were halted by his publisher, Henry Holt, after it was found that the book contained numerous errors and that Pellegrino had relied on a fraudulent source for key claims. In 2006 Viking published Greg Mortenson's *Three Cups of Tea*, a bestselling account of how he was inspired to build numerous schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In 2011 the television program *60 Minutes* charged Mortenson with misrepresenting his personal story and accomplishments and raised the possibility of financial irregularities in his charitable work.

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