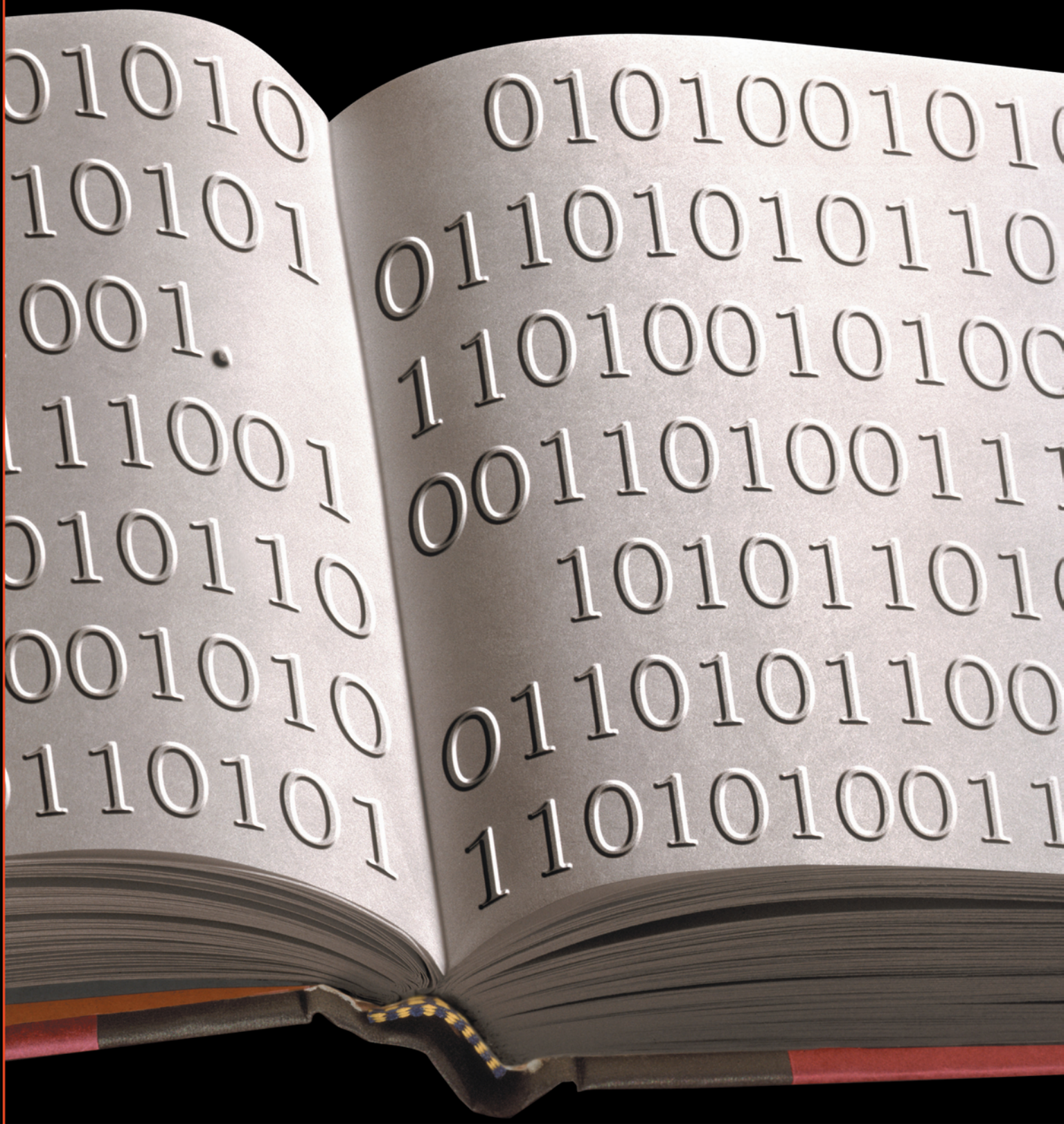


# BOOKS<sub>IN THE</sub> DIGITAL AGE

JOHN B THOMPSON





# **Books in the Digital Age**



# **Books in the Digital Age**

The Transformation of Academic and  
Higher Education Publishing in Britain  
and the United States

John B. Thompson

polity

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First published in 2005 by Polity Press Ltd.

Polity Press  
65 Bridge Street  
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press  
350 Main Street  
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN 0 7456 3477 X  
ISBN 0 7456 3478 8 (paperback)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library and has been applied for from the Library of Congress.

Typeset in 10 on 12 pt Times Ten Roman  
by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd, Hong Kong  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by T. J. International, Padstow, Cornwall

For further information on Polity, visit our website: [www.polity.co.uk](http://www.polity.co.uk)

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# Preface

In the late 1990s I became interested in trying to understand the changes that were taking place in an important but hitherto largely neglected sector of the creative industries – the book publishing industry. I was struck by the fact that, while books were a pervasive feature of our social and cultural lives (and, for those of us in the academy, an essential part of what we do as teachers and researchers), we knew very little about how this industry is organized today and how it is changing. The digital revolution was fuelling (and continues to fuel) much speculation about the future of the book – and, indeed, about whether it has a future at all – but there was very little grounded knowledge of what was actually happening in an industry which was, for the most part, taken for granted.

It was against this background that I set out, in the summer of 2000, to try to gain a more systematic understanding of the book publishing industry in the English-speaking world; this book about books is the outcome of the research that preoccupied me for the following three years. I am grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK for the generous support which made this research possible. I'd also like to thank my colleagues in Cambridge for their willingness to grant me leave for two years so that I could concentrate full-time on the study. My research assistant, Alisi Mekatoa, was very resourceful in gathering data and tracking down relevant materials which have been used in various chapters, and I am grateful to her for her help. I am also grateful to Avril Symonds who transcribed a mountain of tapes with stoic perseverance and good humour; to Ann Bone who copy-edited the manuscript with extraordinary care; and to the many people at Polity – including Gill Motley, Sue Pope, Neil de Cort, Andrea Drugan, Emma Longstaff, Reitha Pattison, Breffni O'Connor and Marianne Rutter – who helped to steer this book through the publication process. Above all, my thanks go to the many individuals in the publishing industry who gave so willingly and generously of their time and who, over the course of the last few years, have shared with me their knowledge of and views on the industry of which they are part. Some of these individuals also very generously agreed to read an earlier draft of this text and commented extensively on it. In order to protect their anonymity these individuals have remained nameless, but many of the insights and ideas developed in this book belong to them. They deserve much of the credit for what follows, although I alone accept responsibility for any errors that remain.

J. B. T., Cambridge

# Introduction

For more than five hundred years, books have been a key feature of modern culture and one of the foundations on which education and academic life are based. It is difficult to imagine what Western culture would be, or indeed the culture of any major civilization anywhere in the world today, without the wealth of resources that are preserved, disseminated and handed down from one generation to the next in the form of the book. But in recent years there has been much speculation about the possibility that this object we have known and valued for half a millennium may be destined to disappear. The book publishing industry today is going through a process of change which is probably as profound as anything it has experienced since Johann Gutenberg adapted the traditional screw press for the purposes of manufacturing printed texts. One of the driving forces of this change is the technological revolution ushered in by digitization. No one yet knows exactly how this revolution will play itself out in the field of book publishing. Many have wondered whether the printed book will go the way of the vinyl LP and become a collector's item, a curious relic of a bygone age, while the content that was once packaged and distributed in books will be disseminated in other ways. Will books continue to have a significant presence in a world where the computer and the television have become pervasive cultural forms, cultivating cognitive attitudes and practices that are at odds with the kind of patient attention required to read an extended text? There has been much speculation too about whether the traditional role of the publisher will survive this revolution, for why would publishers be necessary at all in a world where cultural producers could disseminate their work directly over the internet, in the way that Stephen King famously did with his novella *Riding the Bullet*? And why would consumers pay the extra premium that is likely to be charged for the content provided by publishers if they could get the content they wanted free (or much more cheaply) from other sources on the web?

In the heady days of the 1990s, speculation about the future of the book was rife. There were some commentators who claimed to discern a profound shift taking place in Western culture, one which would lead inexorably to the decline of the printed word and its eclipse by a world of electronic communication.<sup>1</sup> Within the publishing industry, various consultants and self-styled experts were predicting the imminent demise of the book and urging publishers to reinvent themselves for an electronic future. But as the new millennium dawned, it soon became clear that much of the speculation about the future of the book had been misguided. By the end of 2001 the much heralded ebook revolution had faltered – it was beginning to look like one of those technological revolutions that had failed, but in any case it had most definitely been postponed – and the dot.com bubble

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Sven Birkets, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994).



that had pumped millions of dollars into online experiments of various kinds had burst. No one was talking seriously now about the imminent demise of the book in the face of the ebook onslaught. Publishers who had invested heavily in the 1990s in experiments in electronic publishing were counting their losses and closing down divisions. Third-party players who had hoped to ride the new wave of electronic publishing were scrambling to find alternative sources of revenue. And yet, despite the evident faltering of the ebook revolution, the book publishing industry was still going through a process of profound and turbulent change. The ebook has commanded the attention of journalists and others who like to tell dramatic stories and to speculate about the end of civilization as we know it, but the real revolution in publishing was taking place elsewhere.

So what are the key changes that are transforming the book publishing industry today? Technology undoubtedly has an important role to play, but it is only part of the story. The industry is also undergoing major changes of a social and economic kind, and we can understand the true significance of the digital revolution in publishing only by situating it within this broader context. Since the 1970s the book publishing industry has been the focus of intensive merger and acquisitions activity, and the structures of ownership and control in some sectors of the industry now bear little resemblance to the world of publishing that existed forty or fifty years ago. Today a handful of large conglomerates, many operating in an international and increasingly global arena, wield enormous power in the publishing world and harbour a growing number of formerly independent imprints under their corporate umbrellas. The idea of the gentlemanly publisher, who relied on his own cultivated judgements of quality and taste to decide which books and authors to publish and who was relatively unconstrained by such mundane matters as costs and sales, now seems like the figure of another age.

Just as some sectors of the publishing industry have changed beyond recognition, so too has the retail sector of the book trade. The independent bookstore serving a local community has not disappeared but, with the rise of the retail chains, it has found itself with its back against the wall. The dramatic expansion of the retail chains since the early 1980s has transformed the channels to market and altered the balance of power between publishers and booksellers. Today publishers depend less and less on the individual and varied decision-making processes of booksellers dispersed across the country and depend more and more on the hugely consequential decisions of centralized buyers working for the big chains. And at the same time as the bricks and mortar business of bookselling has been transformed by the rise of the retail chains, a new player, created by the digital revolution, has appeared on the scene – the online bookstore. The rise of online bookstores like Amazon has opened up new channels to market for publishers and helped to some extent to offset the decline of the independents, but it has also introduced new factors into the book trade which have disrupted traditional practices and injected further variables into a retail world in flux.

The question of how the world of book publishing is coping with this process of turbulent change is a question to which we do not yet have a clear and detailed answer. Like all sectors of modern industry, the book publishing industry produces a constant stream of reports on its own state of health<sup>2</sup> – this kind of ‘institutional reflexivity’ is,

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, the series of research reports produced by Mark Bide, Mike Shatzkin and others and sponsored by Vista Computer Services, listed in the Bibliography as Vista 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999.

one could say, a characteristic feature of modern societies.<sup>3</sup> Occasionally the book publishing industry has been surveyed, as one sector among others, in studies which have looked at how business organizations cope with economic and technological change.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the book publishing industry is sufficiently large and important to command the attention of governments, which from time to time have commissioned their own reports on the state of the industry and its competitiveness.<sup>5</sup> But there have been very few recent attempts to study systematically the modern book publishing industry and to look in depth at how particular sectors of this industry, and particular firms within these sectors, have changed in recent decades. There is a large scholarly literature on the history of publishing and the history of the book, from Gutenberg through to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,<sup>6</sup> and there are many works which recount the history of particular firms. But in the sphere of scholarly research, the contemporary world of book publishing has, by and large, been ignored. Why this neglect?

To some extent this is due, no doubt, to what one could describe as the 'lure of the audiovisual': for those scholars who are interested in contemporary media and cultural industries, the audiovisual sectors tend to exercise a particular fascination. Compared with the film and television industries, or with the emerging industries linked to new technologies and the internet, the world of book publishing seems rather old-fashioned – like a throw-back to the past. It hardly seems like an industry of the future. But this attitude is quite misguided. Publishing is a major industry in its own right – in Britain, for example, the turnover of the publishing industry as a whole (which includes all sectors, newspapers and magazines as well as books and journals) was £18.37 billion in 2000, of which books and journals represented about a quarter; this is significantly larger than the pharmaceuticals industry, which had a turnover of £12.03 billion.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, publishing underpins many spheres of contemporary culture and is a major source of content for other sectors of the media and cultural industries, including film and television. The audiovisual sector and the high-tech industries may have more glitz and glamour, but to focus on these domains at the expense of the publishing industry would be very short-sighted indeed.

While the publishing industry has received relatively little attention compared to other sectors of the media and cultural industries, it has not been completely ignored by academic researchers. Probably the best attempt to provide a detailed analysis of the modern book publishing industry is the now classic study by Coser, Kadushin and

<sup>3</sup> See Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), pp. 36 ff.

<sup>4</sup> See Andrew Pettigrew and Richard Whipp, *Managing Change for Competitive Success* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> A recent example is the report commissioned by the Department of Trade and Industry in the UK, *Publishing in the Knowledge Economy: Competitiveness Analysis of the UK Publishing Media Sector* (London: DTI and UK Publishing Media, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe*, vols 1 and 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopedia, 1775–1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979); Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993); Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> *Publishing in the Knowledge Economy*, pp. 3–4.

Powell.<sup>8</sup> This was a study of the American book publishing industry with an emphasis on nonfiction, ranging from the New York trade (or general interest) publishers to the university presses. Coser and his associates gave particular attention to editorial decision-making and used the concept of the 'gatekeeper' to analyse the publishing process: publishers were viewed as 'gatekeepers of ideas' who, by virtue of their organizational positions, decide which books will be made available in the public domain and which will be excluded from it. This is an exemplary piece of social scientific research, rich in detail and perceptive, and it sheds a great deal of light on a world which, to the outsider, seems clothed in secrecy and governed by the most arcane practices. But however insightful, the work of Coser and his associates is no longer satisfactory for various reasons – let me highlight two.

In the first place, the notion of the gatekeeper is not really adequate as a way of characterizing the selective activities of editors and publishers. The idea of the gatekeeper suggests that there are authors queuing up to get through the gate, and the gatekeeper's job is to decide who can go through and who will be turned away. This model may have been a reasonably accurate reflection of what happened in some sectors of the publishing industry some decades ago, but it doesn't bear much resemblance to the role of an editor in most publishing firms today. Of course, there is a certain amount of this activity of selection – every publishing firm is flooded with unsolicited proposals and manuscripts from would-be authors and from agents, and many editors do spend some time wading through the pool. But in most publishing firms, the 'slush pile', as it is commonly known, is more of a distraction than a source of serious projects. Most editors – and certainly most successful editors today – are much more proactive than the notion of the gatekeeper would suggest. They actively come up with ideas for the books and authors they want to publish, and they actively go out and try to commission them. Of course, the extent to which editors are passive or proactive will vary from individual to individual and from firm to firm; it will also vary from one sector of the industry to another. But even in those sectors of the industry where the role of the editor might have looked something like that of a gatekeeper twenty or thirty years ago, such as the world of the university presses, this is less and less the case. Today editors know that their jobs depend more and more on their ability to sign up the kinds of authors and books that will do well, and to do so in the face of growing competition from other editors who would love to sign up the same authors and books. The idea that they could simply stand by the gate and decide which of the queuing projects would be allowed to pass through bears less and less resemblance to the increasingly pressurized and competitive world in which most editors work today.

A second reason why the work of Coser and his associates is of limited value is that it is now very dated. The research was carried out in the late 1970s, before the most recent wave of mergers and acquisitions which transformed the landscape of the publishing industry in the 1980s and 1990s and before the digital revolution had taken hold. In the two decades that have elapsed since their study was carried out, the industry has changed dramatically, and the key problems faced by different sectors of the industry today are simply not the same as they were in the 1970s and before. The markets for books have changed in many profound ways, the industry has become increasingly glob-

<sup>8</sup>Lewis A. Coser, Charles Kadushin and Walter W. Powell, *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

alized (a factor that is of particular importance for any publisher working in the English language) and the digital revolution has transformed many aspects of the business of publishing. The study of Coser and his associates was path-breaking in its day, but it no longer provides a satisfactory account of the publishing industry at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In more recent years, there have been a few scholars and commentators on both sides of the Atlantic who have gathered data on the book publishing industry, monitored market trends, provided useful overviews and analysed some sectors of the business.<sup>9</sup> But perhaps the most probing accounts of the book publishing industry in recent years are those offered by publishers themselves. André Schiffrin was the managing director of the American trade publishing house Pantheon for thirty years; he led a mass resignation from Pantheon in 1989 after falling out with the new corporate owners of Random House. (Pantheon was acquired by Random House in 1961, and Random House, which was bought by RCA in 1966, was sold to the media entrepreneur S. I. Newhouse in 1980.) Schiffrin went on to found a small independent publishing house called The New Press in 1990. In *The Business of Books* Schiffrin offers a critical, impassioned reflection on what has happened to publishing in the age of conglomerates – an age, argues Schiffrin, when the judgement of editors has been increasingly displaced by the profit-oriented priorities of accountants and shareholders and when intellectual quality and literary merit have been sacrificed on the altar of the market. ‘Books today’, writes Schiffrin, ‘have become mere adjuncts to the world of the mass media, offering light entertainment and reassurances that all is for the best in this, the best of all possible worlds. The resulting control on the spread of ideas is stricter than anyone would have thought possible in a free society.’<sup>10</sup> Schiffrin sees in the work of small independent publishers and nonprofits some hope that a culture of critical debate nourished by books will not be completely extinguished, but he knows very well that the future of many of these small operations in an age of conglomerates is by no means guaranteed.

A somewhat similar broad-brushstroke account, although written from a very different perspective, is offered by Jason Epstein, for many years editorial director at Random House and one of the most distinguished editors in American trade publishing. In *Book Business* Epstein reflects on the rise of the conglomerates and the retail chains, which together, he argues, have pushed publishing in a direction that clashes with its very nature. For trade book publishing is by nature a cottage industry; it is essentially a craft, a vocation that depends on the commitment and judgement of editors and on the unpredictable tastes of the public. It is not the kind of business that lends itself to corporate synergies and high returns on investment – ‘a cottage industry within an industrial conglomerate makes no sense.’<sup>11</sup> Hence the growing concentration within the industry is

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Peter J. Curwen, *The UK Publishing Industry* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1981); Peter J. Curwen, *The World Book Industry* (London: Euromonitor, 1986); Albert N. Greco, *The Book Publishing Industry* (Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 1997); Irving Louis Horowitz, *Communicating Ideas: The Politics of Scholarly Publishing*, 2nd edn (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1991); Eric de Bellaigue, *British Book Publishing as a Business since the 1960s: Selected Essays* (London: British Library, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> André Schiffrin, *The Business of Books: How International Conglomerates Took Over Publishing and Changed the Way We Read* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 152.

<sup>11</sup> Jason Epstein, *Book Business: Publishing Past, Present, and Future* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 8.

bound to damage publishing and to disappoint the corporate chiefs. But Epstein is optimistic about the future. New technologies and the rise of the internet will, he surmises, enable publishing to become once again a cottage industry of diverse and autonomous units, able to create and disseminate content to readers on 'the global village green' of the web and to bypass the big conglomerates and superstores that have come to dominate the modern book business.

Schiffrin and Epstein are very thoughtful commentators, and their long careers in the heart of the American publishing industry have given them unique vantage points from which to view its recent history and its current troubles. But their accounts are inextricably entangled with their own personal experiences and career trajectories. These are not well-rounded and even-handed accounts of an industry in the midst of change, nor do they purport to be: they are memoirs with a critical edge. They are personal and sometimes opinionated accounts – gracefully written, rich in anecdote, tinged with a shade of nostalgia – of an industry as seen from the particular perspectives of two protagonists who have charted their own courses through the complex and turbulent world of publishing. That the protagonists have charted their courses so successfully and recounted them so eloquently is a tribute to their remarkable talents as publishers and authors, but this does not alter the fact that their accounts are, by their very nature, partial. And Epstein's vision of the kind of publishing future that will be ushered in by new technologies is, it should be said, laced with a strong dose of wishful thinking.

So how can we develop a more systematic account of the changing structure of the book publishing industry today? To begin with, it is important to see that 'the book publishing industry' is an enormously complex and varied domain. There are many different kinds of book publishing, and many different kinds of books and markets, and it would be misleading to treat them as a single whole. Commentators like Schiffrin and Epstein are writing primarily about American trade publishing, and much of what they say would apply with equal force to trade publishing in Britain, France, Germany and elsewhere. But the extent to which their accounts are relevant to other sectors of the publishing industry, such as academic or textbook publishing, is much less clear. So the generic notion of 'the book publishing industry' must be broken down. How should we do this?

One way of doing this is by introducing the concept of publishing field: the world of book publishing can be conceptualized as a set of publishing fields. We can then proceed on the assumption that each of these fields has its own characteristics and dynamics, and each has its own history that differs in some respects from the histories of other fields. The individuals who work in the publishing industry are usually embedded in one of these fields, and they may know very little about what goes on in fields other than their own. The world of publishing is like a set of games, each of which has its own rules, like chess and checkers and monopoly: you can be very good at one game but know nothing about the others, having never played them and perhaps never taken much interest in them either. So if we want to understand the world of publishing and how it is changing, we have to focus on the different publishing fields and try to reconstruct the distinctive properties and dynamics of each.

So what is a field? A field is a structured space of social positions; it is a structured space of resources and power with its own forms of competition and reward.<sup>12</sup> Markets

<sup>12</sup> This concept, which is borrowed from the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, is elaborated in more detail in chapter 2.

are an important part of fields, but fields are much more than markets: they are also made up of agents and organizations and the relations between them, of networks and supply chains, of different kinds and quantities of power and resources that are distributed in certain ways, of specific practices and forms of competition, etc. Part of what I shall try to show is that each field has a distinctive dynamic – what I shall loosely call ‘the logic of the field’ – which is the outcome of a specific set of forces and pressures and which shapes the activities of particular agents and organizations. The logic of the field defines the conditions under which agents and organizations can participate in the field and flourish or falter within it – that is, it defines the conditions under which they can play the game. But this logic can also have unintended consequences and can throw different agents and organizations into conflict with one another, as we shall see.

There are many different publishing fields ranging from general trade publishing to a multitude of more specialized fields – the field of scholarly publishing, the field of college textbook publishing, the field of children’s book publishing, the field of illustrated art book publishing, and so on. Each of these fields has its own distinctive characteristics and dynamics. Of course, these fields overlap in many ways and the boundaries between them are often blurred. The picture is further complicated by the fact that many individual publishing firms operate in several fields at the same time. Nevertheless, as I shall try to show, each field has its own peculiar properties and forms of competition. Even if a particular firm operates in several fields at once, it does not operate in these different fields in the same way. Most publishers realize that if they want to be successful in different fields, they must become experts in each: they know they cannot apply the principles of trade publishing to the field of college textbook publishing and hope to succeed. Hence the larger firms which operate in different fields tend to differentiate themselves internally and to create specialist divisions that can build up the knowledge, skills and expertise to compete effectively in particular fields. Publishing firms compete with one another only in the context of specific fields, for it is only in the context of specific fields that they run up against other firms who are seeking to acquire similar content or to sell books of a similar kind.

It is also important to distinguish publishing fields from other social fields to which they are related in various ways. For example, the field of academic or scholarly publishing cannot be understood without considering the relations between this field, on the one hand, and the field of higher education (including the world of university libraries), on the other. These fields are not the same, they have different social and institutional characteristics, but they are locked together through multiple forms of interdependency. So too with the field of college textbook publishing: this is a field that cannot be properly understood unless one takes account of its relation to the field of higher education, which provides both the principal source of content for textbook publishers (in the form of authors who are often academics employed by colleges and universities) and the principal market for the content produced by them (in the form of students who are taking courses at institutions of higher and further education). Similarly for schoolbook publishing, professional publishing, illustrated art book publishing, etc.: all of these publishing fields are linked to other social fields on which they depend and which depend to some extent on them. But these fields, while mutually interdependent, are also shaped by different interests and governed by different logics. The field of higher education, for instance, has its own structures and constraints and its own mechanisms of reward and success, and these do not coincide with those that prevail in



the fields of scholarly or textbook publishing. So while the fields are closely linked through relations of mutual interdependency, they are also governed by different logics which can give rise to tension, misunderstanding and conflict.

While we can understand the world of publishing only by understanding how specific fields of publishing work and how they are related to other social fields, at the same time we can also see that there are certain broader developments that have affected the world of publishing as a whole in recent years – and, indeed, some of these developments have affected other sectors of industry as well. The particular ways in which these broader developments have been played out in the world of publishing varies from field to field. Some developments are more significant in some fields than in others, and in each field where these developments are significant, the specific ways in which they are manifested are always shaped by the distinctive properties of the field. So what are these broader developments? There are four which are particularly important and which will feature prominently in the chapters that follow.

(1) *The growing concentration of resources* In many publishing fields, mergers and acquisitions have led to growing concentrations of power and resources in the hands of large corporations. This is a process that has proceeded in different ways and to different degrees in different fields – it is by no means a uniform process that has shaped all publishing fields in the same way and to the same extent. The process of concentration or ‘conglomeratization’ has been particularly marked in trade publishing, in educational publishing and in professional publishing, to mention a few; it has been much less marked in a field such as academic or scholarly publishing, partly because of the distinctive role of university presses in the scholarly publishing field. It is the growing concentration of publishing resources in the hands of large conglomerates that has particularly exercised commentators like Schiffrin and Epstein, and rightly so – it is a development of fundamental importance. But their analyses of this phenomenon are shaped largely by their own experiences and are focused primarily, if not exclusively, on the field of trade publishing. The ways in which this development has manifested itself in other fields, and the implications of this development for other sectors of the industry, are issues that Schiffrin and Epstein do not explore.

(2) *The changing structure of markets and channels to market* Just as important as the growing concentration of resources is the changing structure of markets and of channels to market. Again, the ways in which markets have changed varies a great deal from one field of publishing to another – the developments are often quite specific to certain fields. But there are some aspects of this change that are more generic and have affected many fields. One such aspect is the changing structure of the retail trade, and in particular the rise of powerful retail chains such as Barnes & Noble and Borders in the US, and WHSmith and Waterstone’s/Dillons in the UK. The rise of the retail chains has radically transformed the nature of bookselling and has altered the balance of power between publishers and booksellers; it has also exacerbated the problem of returns, which has always been a major source of uncertainty for the stock management side of publishing. Another generic aspect of the changing structure of markets has been the emergence of online retailers or ‘e-tailers’, like Amazon.com, barnesandnoble.com and numerous others. Online retail has opened up new channels to market that simply did not exist before, and in some fields of publishing (such as academic publishing) this has



stimulated the sales of backlist titles which are of interest to relatively small circles of specialists. But online retail has also introduced a whole series of new uncertainties into the book trade, not the least of which is the financial precariousness of the online retailers themselves.

(3) *The globalization of markets and publishing firms* The growth of publishing conglomerates, the rise of retail chains and the emergence of online retailers have all contributed to the increasing globalization of markets and publishing firms. The large conglomerates all operate on a transnational basis, and many look increasingly to foreign markets as a way of expanding their businesses. But even smaller publishing firms find themselves operating in an increasingly globalized marketplace where data about books are now readily available online to anyone anywhere in the world. This process of globalization in the sphere of publishing is deeply interwoven with the rise of English as the de facto international language, and hence the way in which this process is played out varies greatly from one country to another, from one field to another and from one firm to another. Nothing would be more misleading than to assume that globalization in the sphere of publishing – or in any sphere for that matter – is a smooth and uniform process. On the contrary, when you look carefully at what happens in practice, you find large variations in the ways that different firms and different fields are affected by, and affect in turn, developments that take place on a transnational and global scale. The kinds of opportunities and challenges faced by a medium-sized British academic publisher in an increasingly globalized marketplace are very different from the kinds of opportunities and challenges faced by, say, a small Danish firm. But even publishers working in languages other than English are finding that the conditions in which they operate are changing, partly as a result of the growing dominance of English and the increasing international circulation of ideas, authors and content.

(4) *The impact of new technologies* As I have already indicated, the digital revolution represents a major force for change in the publishing industry. At one level, the impact of new technologies in the publishing industry is no different from the impact of new technologies in other sectors of industry: digitization and computerization enable publishing firms to transform their systems for managing information and to make these systems much more efficient, comprehensive and up-to-date. They also have enormous consequences for the ways in which books are produced, from typesetting and design to printing, and for the management of stock and supplies. But the potential impact of digitization in the publishing industry goes much further than that, precisely because the very content of the publishing business is, at the end of the day, a *digitizable asset*. In this respect, the publishing business is more like other media industries, such as the music industry, than it is like those industries concerned with the production of physical objects, such as cars or refrigerators. True, the printed book is a physical object, but the digital revolution made publishers increasingly conscious of the fact that their assets comprised not just their warehouses full of books but also the *content* that was realized in those books. It was the *content*, and the control of the copyrights that governed what they could do with that content, which was in some respects their key asset, not the books themselves. Of course, the physical books were not insignificant – they were, after all, the principal means by which publishers' content was realized and exchanged in the

marketplace, and therefore the principal source of revenue. This had been so for many centuries and, for most publishers in most fields, it was still overwhelmingly the case. But it was by no means certain that physical books would remain the dominant medium of dissemination in all fields of publishing forever. The story of the impact of digitization in the world of publishing is, in part, the story of how publishers have come to realize that the content they acquire is an asset that can be manipulated and stored in digital form, and how they have experimented – sometimes successfully, sometimes disastrously – with the realization and dissemination of this content in formats other than the bound and printed book. As we shall see, this is a story in which some lessons are clear while others remain clouded in uncertainty, and we are still a long way from knowing how the plot will unravel in the end.

In exploring the ways in which these and other developments have transformed the world of publishing over the last few decades, I shall not attempt to provide a comprehensive account. Given the size and complexity of the publishing industry, a degree of superficiality would be the unavoidable consequence of any attempt to be comprehensive. I shall focus instead on two fields of publishing which are linked to one another and which stand in a close relation to the field of higher education – namely, the field of academic or scholarly publishing, on the one hand, and the field of college textbook publishing (or what I shall call ‘higher education publishing’), on the other. Why these fields? There are several reasons. In the first place, these are fields that tend to be neglected by commentators on the publishing industry, since they are generally seen as less glamorous than trade publishing. It is the world of trade publishing, with its bestsellers and high-profile authors, that tends to be the focus of the attention of commentators like Schiffrin and Epstein, and it is the world of trade publishing that occasionally catches the attention of the press. It is rare for the fields of academic and college textbook publishing to be noticed, let alone analysed in depth, in the more popular commentaries on the publishing industry. Yet academic and college textbooks published represent a substantial proportion of annual book output (roughly a third of all new books published in Britain each year could be classified in this way); and educational publishing as a whole (including school and college textbooks) accounts for a substantial proportion of total book sales (combined sales of school and college textbooks account for more than a third of total book sales in the US). Moreover, academic and college textbook publishing have in many ways been at the forefront of the recent changes affecting the publishing industry, and experiments with new technologies have proceeded much further in these fields (as well as in the fields of journal publishing and reference publishing) than they have in the world of trade publishing.

But there is another reason why the fields of academic and college textbook publishing demand much more attention than they have received hitherto: these are fields upon which the whole edifice of higher education has come to some extent to depend. Academic publishing – the world of the university presses as well as commercial academic publishers – has traditionally been one of the principal means by which scholars make available the results of research and communicate with other scholars, as well as with students and other readers who are interested in serious scholarly work. Academic publishing has traditionally been one of the key mechanisms for the dissemination of scholarship, one of the key providers of high-quality content and one of the driving forces of intellectual debate in the modern world. Similarly, the whole pedagogical process within higher education has for many decades relied heavily on the availability

of textbooks of various kinds which can be recommended to students and assigned as reading for courses. Where would higher education be if there were no books available for students to read? Where would it be if academics could not publish the results of their research and there were no books to discuss and debate? The two worlds of higher education, that of teaching and that of research, are dependent in many ways on the output of academic and higher education publishers, and yet those whose lives are spent within higher education know surprisingly little about this industry upon which their own activities – and to some extent their careers and livelihoods – depend.

And it is not just the academy that has come to rely in countless ways on an industry about which it knows very little: the output of academic publishers also makes a vital contribution to the broader sphere of public discussion and debate. We should not underestimate the importance of books in helping to cultivate the kind of critical and informed culture that is essential to what we could call a vibrant public sphere.<sup>13</sup> Books provide a readily accessible medium in which individuals can provide sustained, in-depth analyses and critical commentaries on matters of general social and political concern – analyses and commentaries which can inform and stimulate debate in other media. Of course, it is not only academic publishers who make available books of this kind: there are many trade publishers who see themselves, and justly so, as providers of serious nonfiction for the general reader. But as trade publishing has become increasingly concentrated and more oriented towards publishing authors and books which are likely to have higher and more predictable sales, the role of academic publishers in making available high-quality content in the public domain has grown. Academic publishers can take a longer-term view and can live with lower expectations in terms of sales; they don't have to be preoccupied with quick returns on investments. Hence they have more latitude, at least in principle, to publish high-quality books which may turn out to be valuable contributions to public debate, even if the real value of the contribution may become clear only later. It is significant that in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, it was books published by university presses – such as Angus Gillespie's *Twin Towers* (published by Rutgers University Press in November 1999), Ahmed Rashid's *Taliban* (published in the US in April 2000 by Yale University Press, although originated by I. B. Tauris in Britain), and Bernard Lewis's *What Went Wrong?* (published by Oxford University Press in January 2002) – that became unexpected bestsellers, providing readers with the kind of historical background and in-depth analysis that enriched and informed public debate. At a time when developments within the publishing industry are making it more difficult for trade publishers to publish books of serious nonfiction which do not have a clear and immediate appeal, the role of academic publishers in creating a pool of high-quality content that is available if and when the need arises has become more important than ever.

The fields of academic and higher education publishing may be vital both to higher education and to the broader public sphere, but what is happening within these fields? Are they flourishing? Are they languishing? Are they on the brink of collapse? What do we know about the state of these industries upon which so much of our educational and educated culture has come to depend? What do we know about the forces and factors that are driving change in these industries? And what would happen to our edu-

<sup>13</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, tr. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).

cational and our public culture if these industries were to founder or to change in fundamental ways? These are among the questions to which I shall seek to provide some tentative answers – or at least to provide some of the background material we shall need if we want to be able to answer these questions in a reasoned and well-informed way.

The research that forms the basis of this study was carried out over a period of three years, from 2000 to 2003. The research was restricted to the fields of academic and higher education publishing; it was also restricted to English-language publishing, and specifically to publishing in Britain and the United States. (Further details on the methodological aspects of the research can be found in the Appendix.) While this study is focused on academic and higher education publishing, the approach developed here – based on the idea of analysing the logic and development of publishing fields – could be applied with equal validity to other sectors of the publishing industry.

The study is divided into four parts. Part I deals with some general issues concerning the nature of publishing as a business – what kind of business it is, how it is organized, how the publishing supply chain works, etc. It also introduces the concept of the publishing field and examines some of the generic properties of publishing fields in more depth. Part I concludes with a chapter that explores in more detail some of the broad trends and developments that have characterized the publishing industry since 1980.

Part II is focused on the field of academic or scholarly publishing. The nature of academic publishing is defined in relation to the world of the academy which it serves and which is served by it. Against this backcloth, I then seek to uncover the key dynamics that have shaped the evolution of this field since the late 1970s and early 1980s. What are the principal factors that have driven change within this field over the last two to three decades? How have publishing organizations within the field tried to cope with these changes? And where does this leave academic publishing at the dawn of the twenty-first century?

Part III offers a similar analysis of the field of college textbook publishing – or what I prefer to describe as the field of higher education publishing. How has this field changed over the last two to three decades, and how is it changing today? What are the key factors that are driving this change? What are the implications of these developments for the nature of higher education publishing today – and, more generally, for the kinds of content that are being made available, and will be made available in the future, for the purposes of teaching and learning in the sphere of higher education?

Part IV is concerned with the impact of the digital revolution in the world of publishing. I begin by distinguishing between different levels of impact and examining some of the broader issues involved in thinking about the relations between technologies, markets and forms of content. I then examine a variety of electronic publishing initiatives that have been undertaken in the fields of academic and higher education publishing since the mid-1990s and seek to offer a preliminary assessment of them – preliminary because in many cases the experiments are still underway. In the final chapter I try to show that irrespective of the fate of these various experiments, the impact of digitization in the world of publishing has already been profound and irreversible, for it has set in motion another revolution – a quiet revolution, hidden from the gaze of most journalistic commentators – which is transforming and will continue to transform the very nature of publishing as a business and what we could call the life cycle of the book.

# **Part I**

## **The Publishing Business**



# 1

## Publishing as an economic and cultural practice

### The publishing firm

The book publishing business in the West has existed since the late fifteenth century, when Gutenberg's invention of the printing press gave rise to a flourishing trade in books throughout the urban centres of Europe. During the first few centuries of publishing, the distinction between printers and publishers was not clear-cut; many printers operated effectively as publisher-printers, selecting the material to print and using their own resources to print and distribute it. Many printers also relied on external financial backing to undertake particular printing jobs. In some cases they were commissioned by private financiers, publishers or booksellers to print particular texts, in other cases they were commissioned by the Church or the state to produce liturgical works or official publications. But gradually the roles of the printer and the publisher became differentiated, as publishers became increasingly concerned with the activities of selection and risk-taking, while printers operated essentially as manufacturers of printed texts. There are isolated cases where publishing and printing continue to operate today under a single administrative structure. Cambridge University Press still operates both a publishing and printing division, although this is one of the only major publishing houses in the English-speaking world which still has its own printing works. Oxford University Press had its own printing works since its origins in the seventeenth century, but the printing works were eventually closed down in the late 1980s.

For at least the last two centuries, most publishers have operated primarily as organizations concerned with acquiring symbolic content and the rights to use this content, processing the content in various ways and making available the financial capital necessary to turn it into stocks of books which can be distributed and sold in the marketplace. Publishers today are essentially *content-acquiring and risk-taking organizations oriented towards the production of a particular kind of cultural commodity*. They acquire rights in certain kinds of symbolic content and then speculatively invest capital to transform that content into physical books which they hope they can sell in sufficient quantities and at a suitable price to generate a profit. Their investment is protected by the law of copyright, the origins of which stem in part from the concern on the part of printers in early modern Europe to protect their exclusive right to print and sell books without fear of piracy. If the books sell well, the publisher may generate a healthy return on the investment; a successful title may be reprinted on numerous occasions, helping to create a backlist which provides financial stability to the firm. But the sales of a book may also fall well short of the publisher's expectations, in which case the risk is borne by the publisher, who may have to write off unsold stock.



Most publishing firms are divided into separate departments which are hierarchically structured and interconnected in terms of the workflow. A book typically begins life in the editorial department, which is responsible for acquiring new content, building and maintaining relationships with content creators, negotiating contracts with authors and others, and overseeing the intellectual development of projects. When a final manuscript has been approved by the editorial staff, it is generally handed over to a desk-editing department, which prepares the text for production. The copy-edited manuscript is then handed over to a production department, which is responsible for overseeing the production process through to the final delivery of bound and jacketed copies to the warehouse. Specific aspects of the production process, such as copy-editing, jacket design, typesetting, printing and binding, are often contracted out to freelancers or specialized firms which work for a specified fee paid by the publisher. At a certain stage in the production cycle, the marketing department begins to implement a strategy for the promotion of a specific title, which will also commonly feature in batch publicity material such as catalogues. While each department has its own specialized tasks and may have a significant degree of autonomy, the relationship between these departments tends to be hierarchically structured. The relative power of different departments, and of individuals and groups within these departments, will vary from one firm to another and from one type of publishing to another; it may also vary over time, as changing circumstances alter the relative importance of different tasks and functions within the firm.

In order to develop this analysis further, it is helpful to introduce three concepts: the *publishing cycle*, the *publishing chain* and the *publishing field*. The publishing cycle refers to the stages through which a book typically moves, from the contracting of the project to the point at which it goes out of print – it describes, in other words, the typical life cycle of the book. The publishing chain refers to the interconnection of organizations involved in the publishing, selling and distribution of books; this is a chain in which the publisher is one particular link, and where each link in the chain seeks to provide a specific range of functions or services which are valued by others. The publishing field is the structured space of positions in which different publishers, agents and other organizations are located; it is a space in which relative positions are defined by the differing kinds and quantities of capital possessed by the agents and organizations concerned. I shall examine the publishing cycle and the publishing chain in this chapter; the next chapter will be devoted to the analysis of the publishing field.

## The publishing cycle

The publishing cycle defines the stages through which a book typically moves in the course of its life history. Each of these stages involves a range of specific activities which are carried out by individuals involved in the publishing process, and some stages require decisions which have a direct bearing on the financial characteristics of the project. The stages have a clear temporal and sequential structure and are typically integrated into a workflow, with certain activities necessarily following others. The financial decisions associated with these stages have varying degrees of risk and uncertainty, which are generally highest at the beginning of the sequence and which become progressively lower as the title moves along the stages of the publishing cycle.