

The Hidden Continents of Publishing

John B. Thompson. *Book Wars: The Digital Revolution in Publishing*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021. xvi + 512 pp. \$35.00 (hardback), \$28.00 (e-book).

Book Wars completes the British sociologist John B. Thompson's trilogy on book publishing, which began with *Books in the Digital Age* (2005) and continued with *Merchants of Culture* (2010).¹ The first title was an expansive survey of academic publishing in the 1990s; the second was a compelling account of the social structure of Anglo-American trade publishing. *Book Wars* brings the analysis of trade publishing up to the present, focusing on the impact of digitization. Thompson combines a Bourdieusian analysis of fields with case studies of publishing-industry participants based largely on interviews. His work links the sociology of culture and that of organizations. Literary scholars will see *Book Wars* as primarily a contribution to book and media history, but any scholar of contemporary literature should pay heed to this long but highly readable guide to the industrial and social conditions of publishing today. Thompson makes a convincing case for his basic but fundamental claim: the impact of digitization on publishing has been deeply uneven. Print forms have not been swept aside by new digital ones. Instead, both the print book and the established large publishing firms persist, even as digitization has introduced new players and new subdivisions into the publishing field, altering its relations of power. The book's persistence has gone hand in hand with broad transformations in production and consumption, especially that of fiction.

The first part of *Book Wars* is a revisionist history of the e-book. The advent of the Internet seemed to promise that the print codex would be superseded by more interactive, more hypertextual, more multimedia forms. Though early e-reader devices were niche products, the rapid take-off in e-book sales after the introduction of the Amazon Kindle in 2007 seemed to fulfill this prophecy. But e-book sales leveled off, declining after 2012 in the US and after 2014 in the UK, and the various more experimental e-book forms have all proved short-lived; it was a "false dawn" (102). Using sales data from a large trade publisher, Thompson shows that among all book genres, only genre fiction—above all romance and mystery—made a dramatic shift to digital. Genre fiction, Thompson argues, was well-adapted to the affordances of the e-book in its "form factor" (42): its narrative form was suited for sequential reading, and its ephemeral status meant it had low "possession value" (44). Seen in this light, e-books are "a new format, hugely significant as such, but not a new form" (56), with impacts comparable to those of the mass-market paperback format introduced seven decades earlier.

1. *Books in the Digital Age: The Transformation of Academic and Higher Education Publishing in Britain and the United States*, Polity, 2005; *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, Polity, 2010 (2nd ed., 2012).

Thompson devotes a pair of chapters to the legal confrontations that ensued when the big tech giants, Google, Apple, and Amazon, entered the field. The Google Books scanning project, launched in 2004, was embroiled in lawsuits until 2012. Publishers and the Authors Guild sued because it seemed Google’s universal library—and its own bookselling operation—might put them out of business. Thompson shows that, as with the e-book, the millennium failed to arrive. Google won the legal battles, but by the time it had done so, its search monopoly was secure, and it was no longer interested in books. Of course, for literary scholars the digitization of most of our research materials *is* an epochal development—it both radically increased our range of access and set long-term limits on how much further anyone can go. Robert Darnton predicted at the height of the Google Books crisis in 2009 that public institutions would probably have to go back and scan again in order to surpass Google’s limitations and make it a “job done right”²; Thompson’s publisher subjects are now satisfied that no one will ever dare to do so (137).

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Thompson uses a detailed account of the 2012 U.S. Department of Justice suit against Apple and five large publishers for e-book price-fixing to explore the limits of contemporary antitrust. The DOJ’s successful pursuit of Apple contrasts with its lack of zeal in scrutinizing Amazon. Amazon holds a near-monopoly in e-book selling—now more than 75% of unit sales (430–31)—and, for publishers, is also nearly a monopsony: Amazon is the dominant *buyer* of what they produce in both print and digital form (41% of all new books in 2014 [154]). Nonetheless, Thompson argues, the enforcers are much more likely to pursue a multiparty “conspiracy” to keep prices up than to scrutinize the actions of a single entity which, ostensibly, uses its bulk to offer consumers low prices. This contrast is a result of the way antitrust was reshaped by “the political agenda of neoliberalism and deregulation” (165), in particular the Chicago School exemplified by Robert Bork.

The rise of Amazon, thus abetted by a neoliberal economic, legal, and political framework, entails a change in the nature of visibility for books. In 2000, the dominant booksellers were the big retail chains; they accounted for 30% of adult trade book sales, as against 10% for Amazon (145). In the chain-store epoch, the major dilemma for publishers was what *Merchants of Culture* called the “shrinking windows” of visibility. Books were expected to sell in their first weeks of publication or not at all; backlists vanished from view, and only mass-promoted big bestsellers stood a chance of widespread visibility.³ Two decades later, it is Amazon whose “control over visibility puts publishers at its ‘mercy’” (190). Because the books we browse on Amazon are algorithmically tailored to us, the “standardized visibility” of the chain store has been displaced by ostensibly “personalized and virtual or de-spatialized” (186) visibility. But personalization belies the site’s tendency to cultivate “similarity and predictability” (189): Amazon recommends books that are bought together, steering each user into getting more of the same. Thompson sounds a note of regret for the putative “diversity and discoverability” of books in the chain bookstore (189), even though his own earlier work showed the short-termism and

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2. Robert Darnton, “Google and the New Digital Future,” *New York Review of Books*, December 17, 2009, <https://www.nybooks.com/2009/12/17/google-and-the-new-digital-future/>.

3. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture*, chap. 7.

narrowness of large-chain retail. Though “browsing” on Amazon is a baleful experience even by comparison to the antiseptic aisles of Barnes & Noble, it is far from clear that Amazon produces *more* uniformity and narrowness than its predecessors.⁴ Thompson himself acknowledges that Amazon’s enormous catalogue and digital book production have together given new life to backlists and out-of-print works (14–15). It remains an open question whether the changes in book visibility have led to qualitative changes in the diversity of books sold.

Amazon’s involvement with books is not, however, limited to selling them. Amazon has also become the major platform for self-publishing, in the course of an enormous expansion of this practice enabled by digitization. Thompson gives a comprehensive and often startling overview of developments in “non-traditional” publishing, mapping out a subfield of literary production which is largely unknown to literary scholarship. In the first decade of the 2000s, Amazon dominated the emergent business of low-fee self-publishing in print, merging multiple firms into the “Amazon CreateSpace” imprint, which now accounts for millions of new ISBNs every year (261). Around the same time, Silicon Valley gave birth to several platforms which allow authors to publish e-books for no fee at all, instead splitting the revenues. These platforms include Lulu and Smashwords, which between them account for more than 100,000 new e-book titles a year (260). But it is again Amazon that has the largest e-book self-publishing platform with Kindle Direct Publishing. Unlike the other platforms, Amazon can exploit its e-book market dominance to steer self-publishers into selling with it exclusively in order to claim a share of revenues from its e-book subscription library, Kindle Unlimited.

Thompson describes the emergence of the “indie author” as a positively-valued identity among self-publishing writers, setting aside the stigma of vanity publishing in favor of membership in a putatively “progressive, supportive, forward-looking movement” (223). And, in Bourdieusian fashion, he notes that this new sector is organized as a field in which players must husband their “symbolic capital” or reputations. Although self-publishing bypasses editorial selection, the platforms still seek to maintain their “image” by weeding out copyright infringement, hate speech, and illegal forms of pornography (232). Thompson cites figures suggesting that self-published e-books may even be claiming a growing share of the total e-book marketplace as the large publishers’ e-book sales have flattened out. The figures themselves are dubious, because much of the sector is in the Amazon black box; Kindle Direct books are not assigned ISBNs, and Amazon does not publicize detailed sales data. Self-publishing is practically a “hidden continent” by comparison with the well-mapped marketplace of the traditional publishers (277). From the perspective of the sociology of publishing, one can only say that there are now two “parallel universes” of publishing, with occasional traffic between them, and Amazon, of

4. These worries over standardization also resonate across the long history of book marketing, whenever new distribution channels promise to reach wider audiences. Janice A. Radway shows how denunciations of the standardization of literature accompanied the appearance of the Book-of-the-Month Club in the 1920s; see *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire*, U of North Carolina P, 1999, pp. 205–10.

course, bulking large in both.

The implications for contemporary literature scholarship—naturally not explored by the sociologist—might be considerable. From Thompson's figures, it follows that most contemporary novel-writing in English is the writing of self-published romance novels in electronic formats. Nor is this only a matter of millions of amateurs putting unreadable texts into the void; though most such books languish unread, Thompson cites figures indicating that Kindle Direct and the self-publishing platforms do e-book business at a scale comparable to that of the large publishers, and, in all cases, genre fiction, especially romance, predominates (278). Thus a good proportion of novel *reading* is also in self-published genre fiction. Over the last twenty years a radical transformation in the social and technical distribution of the novel, and perhaps of literacy itself, has taken place. Literary scholarship seems to have taken little notice, acting as if literature is only to be found in the output of traditional publishers.

In one way this situation is not new. Scholarship of any period since industrialization confronts problems of selection and aggregation in navigating the masses of print. Literary scholars have long given commercial fiction, especially genre fiction, short shrift. There have been many exceptions, of course, and those of us who study genre fiction should pay close attention to the significantly transformed infrastructure Thompson describes. In fact, the "hidden continent" of self-publishing resembles an important earlier genre-fiction medium, the U.S. interwar pulp magazine, with its low barriers to entry, its marginalized cultural status, and its artisan ideology of production ("indie"). The "parallel universe" phenomenon, however, means that scholars' usual media environment is unlikely to bring self-published e-book titles to their attention. Only newsworthy successes and cross-overs to "traditional" publishing stand a chance, but there is no reason to assume such unusual cases tell us everything we would wish to know. Even scholars with no interest in self-publishing or genre fiction must adjust their sense of authorship and readership to encompass the significant possibility that both of these can be mediated by self-publishing platforms.

Aside from the self-publishers, Thompson gives a sympathetic account of a vast menagerie of digital-age publishing ventures, many of which, even the largest, were quite unfamiliar to me. *Book Wars* includes case studies of enterprises as varied as the e-book-discounting service BookBub (10 million subscribers), the bespoke book-app-publishers Touch Press (an ephemeral hit with the 2011 *Waste Land* app), the crowd-funding publishers Inkshares and Unbound, the failed book-subscription service Oyster and its somewhat more successful competitor Scribd, the audiobook giant Audible (bought by Amazon), and the mobile-phone-fiction social network Wattpad (80 million users, predominantly teenagers). Typically Thompson narrates the emergence of these ventures from the perspective of the entrepreneurs he has interviewed, while quietly indicating the field which has shaped and limited their choices; the case histories conclude with explanations for the failures or successes. Thompson's methodological commitments restrict him to a fairly sympathetic presentation, but I confess I often rooted against the tech entrepreneurs congratulating themselves over their ideas for "disrupting" books

and reading. A more unusual and sympathetic personage appears in the chapter on audiobooks: a full-time freelance narrator whose work routine, job possibilities, and professional network receive detailed ethnographic attention. This stretch exemplifies the strongest aspect of Thompson's approach, his ability to bring all the participants of a field into view and situate them in relation to one another.

Book Wars concludes in a curiously discordant fashion. Thompson offers a sanguine assessment of the future of the book. The e-book did not annihilate print, and the book-publishing industry avoided the fate of the music industry, the "hemorrhaging of value" occasioned by Napster and the \$0.99 iTunes track (423). Thanks to the cheapness of producing e-books, the large publishers made ever higher profits in the last decade as their revenues remained steady (418–19). As for the book as such, Thompson recognizes its long history of transformation and envisions a significant future for "long-form reading" across media (483–84). Yet Thompson also considers Amazon's outsize power a major threat to publishers. The problem is not simply Amazon's market dominance in the face of a toothless antitrust regime. Rather, whereas traditional publishers bear a significant part of the financial risks of making books, Amazon has no reason at all to do so. Publishers have "both an interest and an obligation to nurture and support the content creation process" (450). Amazon, in order to amass ever more customers for the rest of its business, could force publishers to accept lower book prices, driving the value of books—and the capital available for risky investments in books or authors—towards zero. Though Thompson suggests antitrust law be revised to regulate this state of affairs, it is hard to imagine such a change to the framework of neoliberal governance except as a part of a much broader political transformation.

Otherwise, Thompson proposes that publishers cultivate more of a direct relationship with readers, and, rather lamely, he dwells on the potential benefits of compiling e-mail addresses of interested readers (467). Rather than cultivating book retailers as buyers, he argues, publishers will now have to reach the individual reader, or rather, "facilitate and participate effectively in a cultural dialogue" (469). Though Thompson suggests that this contact with readers would be a novel development facilitated by the digital revolution, there are certainly historical precedents, like the founding of house monthlies by U.S. publishers in the nineteenth century or the application of market-research and branding techniques to paperback fiction in the postwar era. Indeed, the call to connect with the reader resonates with a notorious 1932 pronouncement on U.S. publishing, the Cheney Report: "The industry has been so concerned with the book that it has forgotten the reader."⁵ Furthermore, Thompson, an acute reader of Habermas in earlier work, surely knows that "facilitating cultural dialogue" is less a matter of enhanced e-mail marketing than of renewing the political, economic, and cultural institutions that undergird the public sphere, which include not only publishers but the other media industries, schools, universities, libraries, and the legal regime that shapes them all (antitrust, copyright, taxation, subsidy). In *The Media and Modernity*, Thompson was clear: "An un-

5. O. H. Cheney, *Economic Survey of the Book Industry, 1930–1931*, Bowker, 1931, p. 18. See Ted Striphas, *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control*, Columbia UP, 2009, pp. 81–91.

regulated market may develop in a way that effectively reduces diversity and limits the capacity of most individuals to make their views heard.”⁶ His own account of Amazon’s effect on the field seems to me to bring this argument up to the present day.

Thompson’s strongest language is reserved for the menacing aspects of what he calls “data power” (434). He argues, following Shoshana Zuboff’s influential work,⁷ that big tech firms like Amazon, Google, and Facebook are engaged in a novel form of accumulation, compiling vast amounts of user data and exploiting it as “information capital” (434), a resource that can extend their market power or be sold in the form of advertising services. Amazon not only has most of the customers, it *knows* all about us and is in a position to manipulate us: “Our choices,” Thompson warns, “are being subtly guided and shaped by processes and algorithms that are informed by our data but whose modus operandi are completely opaque to us” (440). Yet although Amazon doubtless possesses more information about customers, including book buyers, than any other organization, its capacity to shape choices in an individualized way remains purely a supposition. My own impression—to be sure, specific to my own habitus, but probably not unique—is that Amazon’s book recommendations are reliably, often hilariously terrible.

Exaggerated claims for, and fears about, the manipulative capacity of advertising are as old as advertising itself. Though we should not dismiss the effect of Big Tech’s user manipulations, in Amazon’s case, at least, a simpler explanation for its dominance is available. Amazon’s power is not data power but monopoly power. Its monopoly in book-selling did not arise from its “nicely targeted email[s]” (440) but from its extraordinary convenience and logistical capacity. Nonetheless, Thompson’s analysis of information capital yields the most wide-ranging insight of the book. Contemporary publishing is, in a parallel to other media industries, now structured by an opposition between “content producers” (publishers) and “network players” (170); Amazon’s relation to publishers may be compared to Netflix’s relation to studios, or Spotify’s to record labels. Whereas content producers seek to profit, economically and/or symbolically, from the value of content, network players seek to increase their user bases, normally by driving down the value of content. Thus, in the field-shaping contests that Thompson describes—though they are hardly “wars,” as the sensationalist title suggests—the stakes are the economic and symbolic value of books. Literary scholars, professionals with a vested interest in books’ value, stand to benefit enormously from Thompson’s account.

At the same time we stand to be thoroughly humbled by our insignificance. Thompson’s book should be read alongside Mark McGurl’s new monograph on the age of Amazon. That book is not under review here, but McGurl’s account as it appeared in essay form provides an illuminating contrast to Thompson’s approach.⁸ While McGurl and

6. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity* Stanford UP, 1995, p. 239.

7. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, PublicAffairs, 2019.

8. “Everything and Less: Fiction in the Age of Amazon,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (September 2016), pp. 447–71. The monograph, forthcoming as I write, is *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon*, Verso, 2021.

Thompson concur in pointing to the rise of Amazon as the most consequential internet-age development for book culture, for McGurl, Amazon can be *interpreted* as a symptom and determinant of a whole ideological climate. Thompson, by contrast, *explains* the economic and organizational consequences of Amazon's trajectory. Though his conclusion gestures towards the broad phenomena of neoliberal capitalism and "individualization" in Ulrich Beck's sense (427), the cultural climate Amazon might emblemize lies largely beyond the realm of investigation. Indeed, Thompson argued in *The Media and Modernity* against the temptation to deduce cultural effects from transformations in the media industries.⁹ It is impossible to imagine Thompson saying, as McGurl does, that the "whole sprawling enterprise" of Amazon is "in a sense, a reading" of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day* or that Amazon "wants to be the hero of a great literary work in its own right."¹⁰

It would be reassuring to say that the critic's interpretive bravura is simply a necessary complement to the social scientist's empiricist restraint. But treating Amazon and its ilk as *texts* in McGurl's fashion may make them seem more amenable to literary-interpretive analysis than they really are. It forfeits the explanatory power that Thompson's argument gains by reconstructing the dynamics of organizations and fields; *Book Wars* shows that understanding the major forces shaping literary production and circulation requires methods appropriate to resolutely non-textual phenomena. Our disciplinary habitus may not be a reliable guide to the hidden continents of literary media. Thompson's map of the changing publishing field points to different lines of inquiry for contemporary literary studies—different objects, different questions—than the ones we have so far taken up.

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9. Thompson, *Media and Modernity*, pp. 45–46.

10. McGurl, "Everything and Less," pp. 465, 469.