Topic Page: Publishing

Definition: publishing from Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary

pronunciation (1580): the business or profession of the commercial production and issuance of literature, information, musical scores or sometimes recordings, or art [newspaper ~] [software ~]

Summary Article: Publishing


The age of print and publishing begins with the development of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg (fl. 1390-1468) in Mainz, Germany in about 1450. Adapting techniques and equipment used in agricultural settings (e.g., the grape press), by 1456 Gutenberg had begun producing multiple copies of texts in printed form, including a 42-line Bible, some grammatical works, a papal indulgence, and at least one broadside astrological calendar. Within a few years of its first use, this new technology for making books had spread throughout Europe (see paper and print).

Printing proved a lucrative business: books became valuable commodities, requiring the development of a sophisticated network of production, sales, and distribution. The late medieval book trade had centered on local markets and needs. The age of humanism, an increase in literacy in the 1600s, and the expansion of literary culture to embrace literature, however, saw printing and publishing expand to become international in scope. From the 1470s, printing spread outward from Germany, appearing in Buda in Hungary in 1473, Cracow in Poland, and Prague in Bohemia within the next two or three years. In Spain book publishing arrived in Valencia in 1473, then Madrid in 1499. Printing appeared in Lisbon in 1489, Scandinavia in 1483, Constantinople in 1488, Salonika in 1515. In England, William Caxton (ca. 1422-91) set up a printing press at Westminster Abbey in 1476, and in Scotland the first book was printed in Edinburgh in 1508 (Finkelstein and McCleery, 55).

NINETEENTH-CENTURY INNOVATION

Until the early 1800s, the general format for the production of books in Western Europe followed basic, established business patterns. Early printers combined the roles of printers, publishers, and booksellers in one, buying rights to works, then printing and profiting from the results. As trade increased to include international links, these roles began to be separated, and by the early nineteenth century, Western European publishers had begun devolving production work to printers, illustrators, and other related production specialists. The technological innovations accompanying the Industrial Revolution in nineteenth-century Britain enabled it to become a world leader in book production and dissemination, producing books faster and less expensively than its continental rivals.

The introduction of the steam-powered press in London in 1814, a Koenig press imported from Germany by The Times newspaper for its daily printing work, sparked its integration into general publishing activity. This, along with advances in mechanical typesetting and setting, stereotyping, and innovations in the reproduction of illustration, led to less costly and faster-produced books (see illustrated novel, typography). Industrialized societies across the world saw the need for a better-educated, certainly literate, workforce to service new processes and occupations. In Britain the Education Acts of the 1870s cemented the growth of literacy so that by the turn of the twentieth...
century the vast majority of the population constituted the market for books (Feather). Book publishing became a boom industry.

Such industrialization of printing and publishing systems went in partnership with the general industrialization of business across Britain and then Western Europe. Mechanization increased market potential and forced publishers to adapt quickly to survive. As Robert Escarpit notes, “faced with a developing market, printing and bookselling underwent a major change, as nascent capitalist industry took charge of the book. The publisher appeared as the responsible entrepreneur relegating the printer and bookseller to a minor role. As a side effect, the literary profession began to organize” (2223).

NEW BUSINESS MODELS

British printers and publishers were among the first to adopt new business models to match new technological opportunities, turning themselves into large, predominantly family-run corporate enterprises. These included Macmillan, William Blackwood & Sons, John Murray, William Chambers, Smith, Elder & Co., and William Longman, almost all founded within the first twenty years of the nineteenth century. Their national dominance would translate into international success as they expanded into the colonial markets that emerged from the 1870s onward. Such success encouraged the free flow of books beyond national borders. Britain and its empire, it can be argued, was the first transnational, globalized economy to emerge as a beneficiary of the advances supported by industrialization. From the 1830s onward Britain's innovations would be copied in other European states and further abroad, with a resulting sea change in trade practices by the mid-nineteenth century. In tandem with such changes an increasingly literate reading audience demanded new products to read, allowing profitable firms to expand and dominate local and national markets. Among the most important to develop in Europe and the U.S. were Hachette in France; Samuel Fischer and Bernhard Tauchnitz in Germany; George Putnam, Houghton Mifflin, and Harpers & Co. in the U.S.; Gyldendals in Denmark; and Norstedts and Albert Bonnier in Sweden (Gedin, 3439; Hall, 44; Chartier).

The rise of the novel as a cultural signifier during the nineteenth century was closely linked to such changes. The number of titles produced by these internationally positioned publishers rose dramatically, in line with a growth in readership and the establishment of well-provisioned commercial bookshops, circulating library networks such as the renowned Mudie’s Circulating Library, public libraries, and retail distribution outlets such as the British railway book-stall networks founded by W. H. Smith in 1842, John Menzies in 1857, and the French network founded by Hachette in 1853 (see libraries). It is estimated that the number of general book titles published in Britain per decade rose roughly from 14,550 in the 1800s to around 60,812 in the 1890s; at the peak of book production, fiction accounted for about a third of the titles listed in contemporary book-trade journals (Eliot, 294,299).

Popular titles could achieve substantial sales in their own right. While a bestselling novel of the 1800s might have had a combined print run and sales of up to 12,000, by the 1890s popular titles were achieving print runs and sales of 100,000 in various editions within the first five years of publication (Eliot, 294). Popular demand for fiction was met in various ways, including serialization in high-quality monthlies, “illustrated” magazines, mass-circulation weeklies, and through syndication in metropolitan, regional, and provincial newspapers. Thus in newspaper and periodical spaces, readers would encounter poetry and fiction in conjunction with fashion, news, opinion, and reportage, a mélange that also engaged and satisfied general reading expectations. Equally, readership interest would be piqued and

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encouraged by the increasing use of advertising in popular journals and in the end pages of novels and other publications.

As the nineteenth century progressed, more and more titles were published and publishers’ niche subjects grew in diversity. In Britain roughly one hundred new titles were published each year up to 1750, growing to six hundred by 1825, and to six thousand by the beginning of the twentieth century at its close new titles topped the hundred thousand mark (Feather). The century also saw experiments with new formats such as the popular series, large quantities of books published at low prices and intended for mass consumption. These were often a means of enabling access to novels that had first appeared in expensive formats: for much of the century, novels were first published in three-volume form, to be accessed mainly through the commercial circulating libraries that dominated book distribution throughout the century. A year after their initial appearance many of these would then be reprinted in the cheaper one-volume form, thus establishing a precedent that still holds true in current book-publishing patterns.

European print communication practices as reconfigured during this period were subsequently exported to other countries, with colonial powers in particular establishing print networks in overseas possessions so as to service didactic and governing needs. At the same time, such international print production and communication systems also proved susceptible to hierarchies and divisions, part of a “distinctive, determinate set of interlocking, often contradicting practices” (Feltes, 17). Literary value, copyright, and the commercial worth of books increasingly became linked to commercial potential, creating a niche for intermediaries such as literary agents to filter and promote the “raw” material needed by publishers.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS

Integral to business success was the management of rights in the texts produced. In 1709, the first U.K. Copyright Act created a template soon adopted in other countries, enshrining in law the principle that copyright in a work belonged to its author. This permitted some authors to demand greater sums when selling their works to publishers. The publication of books on subscription, a popular method of financing publication before 1709, was one method of copyright management, but by the mid-nineteenth century had been superseded generally by contracts offering outright sale of copyright to the publisher. The professionalization of authorship throughout the nineteenth century, which gained impetus as further outlets for literary work opened up, saw contractual arrangements changing, with most publishing contracts by the end of the century offering writers sliding-scale royalty figures based on numbers of copies sold.

However, while copyright could be enforced within the one country, it did not have any international status. For British and English-language publishing, this resulted in a voracious and unchecked pirating of works in the U.S. and elsewhere that drew the ire of many authors and their representatives. Not until the Berne Convention of 1886 was approved did international copyright protection become universal, later strengthened by the Universal Copyright Convention of 1952. In the U.K., the Copyright Act of 1911 incorporated references to non-print media by adding clauses guaranteeing the protection of copyright to visual and oral media. This in turn provided a secure basis both for the development of work in such media and for the adaptation of an author’s work for non-print sources (Finkelstein and Mc Clement, 6263).

INTO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
Such changes in nineteenth-century legal statutes, technology, business practices, and social formations created circumstances by which printed texts, manufactured more quickly and at increasingly cheaper costs, could be sold to more people, generating larger profits for publishers and allowing individual authors to claim more profits from work produced. Much remained static during the first half of the twentieth century, though the introduction in Britain of inexpensive Penguin paperback books by Allen Lane (190270) in 1935 was a key moment in the history of book production. Penguin books drew on previous experiments in paperback production, paying close attention to visually rich covers, marketing and selling in nonconventional; outlets such as retail shops and direct sales, and offering new, original titles in paperback rather than hardback. Their success opened the way for a mass-market explosion in paperback publishing: in the U.S., for example, Robert de Graaf founded Pocket Books in 1939, marketing populist titles with bright covers for a mass readership, while in Britain Penguin faced competition from Pan Books and Panther, established after WWII to tap similar mass-market interest.

Such developments were part of a shift in book publishing to a position strongly dependent on mass market literary taste. As Richard Ohmann comments, “publishing was the last culture industry to attain modernity. Not until after World War II did it become part of the large corporate sector, and adopt the practices of publicity and marketing characteristic of monopoly capital” (22). To increase economies of scale, from the 1960s onward publishing houses merged with other media operators to form large, often trans-national conglomerates. The general traits and practices of family-run and family-focused publishing houses began to be replaced by international corporate organizations that joined together different media areas (books, television, film, music) under one umbrella.

But publishing in the twentieth century also saw exponential rises in global book production. It has been estimated that in 1850 annual world book production totaled 50,000; in 1952 it had risen to 250,000 titles; by 1963 it equaled 400,000; in 1970, 521,000 (Escarpit, 5758; Milner, 70; Zaid, 21). Of such production, four language groups (English, French, German, Spanish) dominate, accounting for between 34 and 36 percent of these titles (Escarpit, 6162). The increasing domination of large global corporations has also involved a shift in the control and shaping of international book markets, particularly in the Anglophone world. In the nineteenth century Britain was the dominant player in innovative publishing terms; by the late twentieth, power and influence had shifted towards U.S.-and continental European-based players (Finkelstein, 338).

These players instituted significant technical developments that shaped contemporary book markets. Thus we have seen an important shift away from fiction to non-fiction titles as the commercially dominant part of a publisher's list, with what Robert Escarpit has called “functional books,” particularly textbooks, providing “powerful testament to the commercial significance of the captive market delivered to the book trade by the systems of higher and secondary education” (Milner, 70). Furthermore, books are increasingly marketed and distributed through a range of nontraditional retail outlets that have their origins in earlier initiatives (such as newsagents, supermarkets, department stores, and book clubs), so expanding the availability of fiction and books beyond specialist bookshops. Equally important has been the place of online retail spaces such as Amazon.com in supporting book sales and distribution in sections of the world that have access to new media and the internet. Finally, audiences have been exposed to more texts worldwide as a result of the adoption of the paperback as a significant publishing format for new books. Pundits have been predicting the death of the book for some time now, but the strength of sales and the reach of texts beyond national borders in such fashion suggest that books may yet survive as important communication tools in the increasingly
globalized media and information world of the twenty-first century.

SEE ALSO: Adaptation/Appropriation; sec1e46Editing; graphic novel; History of the Novel; Journalism; Reading Aloud; Reprints; Reviewing; Translation

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