

Before Amazon. Publishing Industry and Cultural Mutations*

Abstract

Amazon has radically changed the publishing world. And this transformation is so profound that everything done before by the publishing industry today is seen as the product of an apathetic industry, chronically indifferent to change. Nothing could be further from the truth, as this text tries to highlight, and in an attempt to demystify this view, it recovers four moments and areas of the past history of publishing, all with transformative effects that still influence our practices: labor, intellectual property, Christmas celebrations and mass consumption.

Keywords: Book history; capitalism; cultural studies; retail shopping; supermarkets.

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Antes de Amazon. Industria editorial y mutaciones culturales

Resumen

Amazon ha cambiado radicalmente el mundo editorial, y esta transformación es tan profunda que todo lo que se ha hecho hasta ahora en la industria editorial es visto como el producto de una industria apática, crónicamente indiferente al cambio. Nada más lejos de la realidad, como trata de poner de manifiesto este texto que, en un intento de desmitificar esta visión, recupera cuatro momentos y ámbitos de la historia pasada de la edición, todos ellos con efectos transformadores que aún influyen en nuestras prácticas: el trabajo, la propiedad intelectual, las fiestas navideñas y el gran consumo.

Palabras clave: historia del libro; capitalismo; estudios culturales; comercio minorista; supermercados.

1. Introduction

Until about decades ago, editorial production was considered an area insensitive to changes in the environment, an immutable perimeter, clinging to arcane practices and unalterable securities. Its relevant, long-winded transformations have taken place, it was believed, almost exclusively at two defining moments: the distant Gutenbergian past and the ineffable present dominated by Amazon. Between both landmarks, a fossilized industry survived, which, boring, performed the same tasks over and over again. We had to wait until Jeff Bezos arrived to get this industry out of the self-imposed coma.

However, history is never straightforward, linear, and unnuanced. In an attempt to counter this view that fossilizes editorial production, let's consider some examples, taken from different moments, some distant in time, others not so much, that describe a group of people, practices, and interests, constantly engaged in finding new paths for a centuries-old practice. The diversity of aspects, from job organization to marketing models, shows the editorial field as obsessed with new developments, making decisions that resulted in wise practices, many of which remain as such to this day.

2. Areas of the Past History of Publishing

2.1 Outsourcing before Neoliberalism

Publishing was one of the first industries to make a consistent and successful effort to rationalize and standardize mass production from its origin. Only

during the very brief period of the incunabula — the wonderful period between the year 1453, when the printing press was officially invented, and the day before Easter 1501 — the new presses invented by Gutenberg produced some twenty million copies as a result of the thirty-five thousand editions of some fifteen thousand different texts that have reached the present. Such an accomplishment could not have been achieved with a timorous industry but as a result of an effort that can only be described as modern, as [Febvre and Martin \(2005\)](#) categorically state in *The Coming of the Book* (p. 289).

Since its inception, the publishing industry revolutionized many aspects, and labor was no exception. It was one of the first to incorporate hourly labor as part of its processes, an approach that would have to wait until the seventeenth century to become a standard way of compensating the effort of workers in other industrial areas ([Striphas, 2011, p. 7](#); [Febvre & Martin, 2005, pp. 143–153](#)). Third-party involvement in the multiple tasks of the publishing work will be a deep birthmark, so much so that it lasts until today. In recent decades, it has served as an archetype for the systematic erosion of labor modeled under the predominance of the benefactor State that has given way to the precarious work of globalizing neoliberalism ([Menger, 2009](#); [Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011](#)).

Fifteenth-century printing workshops “resembled modern workshops more than medieval factories”, stated [Febvre and Martin \(2005\)](#), and succeeded in optimizing the technical procedures to make the work of presses easier and faster as a “response to the need to produce more books every day at a lower price, [which] led printers to improve their production methods” (p. 143). As part of this rationalization, a tertiary labor model was adopted, we would say now, which boosted this nascent industry along, incidentally, with “some of the earliest trade unions and trade union organizations” ([Phillips & Bhaskar, 2020, p. 23](#)).

2.2 The invention of Piracy

Another phenomenon where we cannot speak of editorial autism is the emergence of piracy, or to define it more nicely, the active role of printing in the “radical

reorganization of what we know today as intellectual property” (Johns, 2009, p. 15).

Since the printing press arrived in England in 1471, the printing activity was largely supervised by the Company of Stationers, the booksellers' Company. Its primary mission was to prevent the printing of seditious texts and illegal behavior (at the time, they were not called piracy), and encourage printing of manuscripts licensed for reproduction. Theft of sheets, the printing of texts whose content was different from what the author had provided to the press, and a fair amount of tricks to bypass the rules were frequent matters denounced to the court that set the code of conduct of the printing guild. A recording system and the application of customary measures, which were verified at the printer's house — the location where the printing tasks were carried out (hence the designation as “publishing house”) — kept alive for a long time the “moral impetus of the book trade in the manner of a living guild community belonging to a civic sphere” (Johns, 2009, p. 27). However, this corporation had started to crack as a consequence of an oligarchic trend of booksellers and their increasing interest in distinguishing themselves from the printers until they became a distinct and hierarchically superior sector. This, in addition to the emerging conflict between the registration and patent systems, was an issue that soon spread across continental Europe.

By then, several ingredients turned the editorial cocktail into a time bomb for the established system. The book guild was increasingly disregarding the rules that allowed for keeping opinions under control. The wider environment began to witness a remarkable increase in the debate of what would become the ‘public sphere’ while the popular press became stronger, which reminds us of the role of social networks during the recent US presidential election that favored Donald Trump: “fiercely sectarian, violently partial, relentlessly devoted to plagiarism, and often foolishly credulous” (Johns, 2009, p. 30).

Faced with this, the Crown believed they had found a way to contain and take advantage of the new disputes, which “were no longer those of the university, the court, and the palace.” The arena where this was settled was that of registrations and patents. Printers had ceded pre-eminence to booksellers — the owners

of copies, as the Saxon book registry entries were called — who were insatiable and encouraged the greatest possible discord because it sold books. The proposal, then, was to put aside registrations and award patents to the English gentlemen far from the publishing industry's worldly passions, which meant a radical shift in this sector.

The reaction of the booksellers was immediate. They invented a tradition (Howsbawn & Ranger, 2011): authorship understood as property. And they put her at the center of the dispute. The American historian Adrian Johns considers this as the germinal formulation of literary property — “an absolute right generated by authorship” that could serve as the backbone of a “moral and economic system linked to the printing press tasks”. Of course, the idea was not supported by any clear precedent, and, according to the American historian, it served to make a surprising twist since “the notion of piracy triggered the conception of a literary property principle linked to authorship and not the other way around” (Johns, 2009, p. 39, italics used herein). The natural right of authors to their works was established, and greater power was given to the sacrosanct property principle and the political legitimacy it entails.

As a result, or as an in-depth continuation of a process with several years of history, knowledge was made known through a cascade of ‘chain appropriations’, often without authorization, as Robert Darnton detailed in his work on the Encyclopedia (Darnton, 2006). That helped, among many other things, the Enlightenment spread thanks to a cascade of ‘illegal’ reprints. As Johns argues, “we could say that without piracy, there would have been no Enlightenment” (Johns, 2009, p. 53).

2.3 Editorial Christmas

Today, the average German possesses about ten thousand objects. In the United Kingdom, there were about six billion garments in 2013 — about one hundred per adult — and a quarter of them never came out of their drawers (Trentmann, 2017). This consumerist fever, which has made us voracious buyers, often uncontrolled, is the result of a long process. Some authors trace this behavior back to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) — the oldest reference — with its obsession with

lacquered cups inlaid with silver and its hairstyles supported by carved bamboo forks. Others contend it lies in the Dutch Republic of the 17th century's Golden Age, when even the maidens had paintings in their rooms, and Great Britain of the 18th century, flooded by the avalanche of novel cheap products: pipes, soaps, woven socks, tobacco, chocolate, and coffee... (Trentmann, 2012). For the consumer society to flourish, as Trentmann points out, attitudes must change: "Goods do not arrive alone. They have to be invited to come in." And that's what happened with books and Christmas in the 19th century.

At that time, small printed objects began to occupy a prominent place in one of the most important traditions of the West: Christmas. The incipient American consumerist fever made books one of the first and most suitable objects to give away on that date — the most important moment of family exchange in modernity. In *The Battle for Christmas* (1996), Stephen Nissenbaum (1997) analyzes the transformation of this festivity. Before the 19th century, this period was a kind of carnival, a time of unlimited alcohol consumption and gangster violence, during which the most elementary rules of coexistence and urbanity were abandoned, a festive violence that seems to be found in the antipodes of the modern end-of-year celebration. As a reaction to the effects of this periodic subversion of the order, a new approach of celebration behind closed doors emerged, in the family communion, which Nissenbaum places as part of a long history of cultural consumption and of practices linked to caring for children, the target of gifts this season. And books played a central role in this transformation: "Publishers and booksellers were the collision forces in the exploitation and development of a Christmas trade, and books were at the forefront of a market-driven Christmas" (Nissenbaum, 1997, p. 140).

By the 1830s, a new type of book emerged in the US: the gift book. This consisted of special anthologies, produced in different formats, which included an *ex libris* to personalize the object, designed for market launch at the peak of Christmas shopping. And these characteristics, diversity of formats, and personalization allowed something impossible to achieve for other mass-generated products: its manufacture was designed for its reception as a sign of intimacy and affection in at least two ways. First, the person giving the gift had to

choose, among many editions, the one that best suited the recipient. And making the right decision was not straightforward because publishers flooded the market with diverse products for different social groups. Second, the *ex libris* allowed those who gave the gift to make their choice even more personal, writing a dedication on pre-printed pages that allowed them to write personalized messages, "suggesting, again, blurred borders between industrial mass production and personal feelings", and gave books a central role in transforming Christmas into a consumerist holiday (Striphas, 2011, pp. 7–8).

This description is hardly surprising. Febvre and Martin (2005, p. 290) pointed out that we should bear in mind the fact that "from the beginning, printers and booksellers worked for profit"; as McLuhan points out, "from the beginning, the printing press has to tackle the issue of 'meeting the public demands'" (McLuhan, 1985, p. 246). Or, to state it more forcefully, as the bibliomane Michel Melot argues: "The book has never escaped capitalism, it is his son. It was a church. It became a market. From one to the other, the cleric has changed" (Melot, 2007, p. 26).

2.4 The Book, Its CURP and the Beginnings of the Supermarket

Two additional examples illustrate our point and fight the idea of editorial immobility, which should help to scare away the ghosts of a moldy industry that looks perpetually at its navel. Now we will address relatively recent issues — the ISBN and the barcode — and how the book trade transformed their exhibition. Books have not only been part of consumer capitalism, which practically started with them but are part of the fuel that drives it and the key to understanding the forms of change and evolution of this transforming consumerist capitalism.

Although its massive application is relatively recent, the history of ISBN dates back at least some 60 years ago. In 1965, W. H. Smith & Son, the then-largest English bookstore chain, decided to translate its paper inventories into computer records. The challenges started when deciding on which of the multiple criteria used to identify a book was to be considered (author, title, edition, publishing house, type of binding, date

of edition, or language, among others). Converting the data from the old analog system into digital entries was an issue for a model with a limited capacity for information handling and that more efficient handling numbers. That was the origin of the Standard Book Number (SBN), a predecessor of the well-known ISBN (International Standard Book Number), something like the CURP of books — a result of the need to create “an abstraction that would allow the endless repetition of individual cases ... without excessively particularizing these objects” (Radway, 1999, p. 166). The model would later be copied by the music industry, which until then had failed in its search for an abstract alternative applicable to vinyl records and also by sweet producers, among the most prominent sectors.

On the other hand, the increase in postwar college enrolment led American bookstores to face the need to find better exhibition and sales models for an ever-increasing number of volumes and readers. To this end, they made a series of decisions that privileged volume sales over aesthetic considerations. This led to “the peculiar history of the relationship between book and food sale” (Striphas, 2011, p. 58). Contrary to what we could assume today, it was bookstores that paved the way to supermarkets and not the other way around. In what way? With shelves that were not behind the counters, with products arranged to be browsed occasionally and for what would later be called self-service. It is hard to imagine today, but when, for example, food products sold in stores lacked clear labels or packaging, book covers served as protection and as bait to attract shoppers. Faced with the established idea that books should be treated as sacral objects, this novel marketing model launched a triad consisting of volume, efficiency, and marketing, paving the way for the modern supermarket and mass marketing.

3. Reflection

As Striphas (2011, p. 187) reminds us, academic reflection on the book publishing industry is another example of Minerva's owl: we focus our energies on a phenomenon at the point where we are about to lose it. And so, when we revisit the past, and more so publishing, there is a mixture of nostalgia and the knowledge that we are trying to understand a world that is evaporating.

However, as we have tried to illustrate through the examples we have briefly rescued from oblivion in this text, the often-journalistic discussions about the worn-out book crisis we have suffered during the last three decades, have obscured, by simplification, the complex, novel and ingenious publishing practices that have become routines associated with the world of modern consumption. In fact, they have been at the forefront of capitalist development for the last five hundred years. And the examples discussed show that they are still there.

4. Conclusion

According to Philips and Bhaskar (2020, p. 24), the editorial work triggered, accompanied, and fostered other profound cultural changes, such as the Reform, scientific revolution, modernism, and communism. So it is not by chance that Amazon, through this Western civilization brick, with over 500 years behind it, is, again, the spearhead of a powerful transformation.

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