Prospectus for

The Marketplace of Ideas:

Book Publishing in a Consumer Culture

A Collection of Essays, Autobiographical Notes, and Cautionary Tales

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I.

Summary

The Marketplace of Ideas:

Book Publishing in a Consumer Culture

Supreme Court Justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes, introduced the metaphor, the marketplace of ideas, into debates about freedom of expression in 1919 when he advocated "free trade in ideas" (Abrams v. United States). Holmes maintained that in democratic societies open trade in a marketplace of ideas would, *ideally*, permit the best ideas to triumph in the court of public opinion. Unshackled by constraints of prior censorship, ideas and works of art would come directly to open markets where their merits could be freely and fairly debated and rationally evaluated by citizens. In this way, Holmes believed the cream would inevitably rise, truth and quality would be served, and a meritocracy of mind could emerge.

Free speech purists conventionally take Holmes to task for corrupting truth by associating it with the Idol of the Marketplace; and social theorists faulted the willful naivete of Holmes' idealism. Posited in the wake of the Robber Barons, Trust Busters, and newspaper mogols like Pulitzer and Hearst, Holmes' metaphor ignores the realities of modern capitalist markets and the social inequalities they produce. Yet, by embracing this metaphor Holmes invested at least as much faith in the salutary character of free inquiry and the rationality of citizens as he did in the mediating powers of the market.

Holmes' formulation simply made explicit what had been implicit in classic Enlightenment arguments for freedom of inquiry, from Erasmus, Milton, Diderot, Voltaire, to Jefferson and Madison: that no publications ought to be subject to prior censorship by church or state. Thomas Jefferson expressed this idea unequivocally when he complained that he was "really mortified" when he discovered that in the United States of America a civil magistrate could order a book suppressed. He responded to this mortification by asserting that it was "the duty" of every patriot "to buy a copy [of the offending book], in vindication of his right to buy, and to read what he pleases." In Jefferson's world, patriots were, of course, a privileged lot: white, male, property owners.

Magistrates and custom agents continued to periodically suppress books in the land of Jefferson's patriots well into the late twentieth century. Nevertheless the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution remains the most radical and comprehensive attempt to protect the 'Natural Rights' of citizens to freedom of speech and inquiry that has ever been codified into law.

In his Apology for Printers (1730), Benjamin Franklin made it clear that, from the beginning of the American experiment, rights to profits for owners of presses and other tradesmen and entrepreneurs were at least as important to patriots as the Natural Rights of citizens. After all even Thomas Jefferson sold his cherished library, which served as the foundation for the Library of Congress, to the

U.S. Government for $100,000 to pay a portion of his debts. By the time Alexis de Tocqueville traveled to the U.S. in the 1830s, "the spirit of trade" was already firmly entrenched within the American marketplace of ideas.

Few authors or publishers can afford to produce books without prospects of compensation. Artifacts of the spirit of trade like copyrights and patents are pragmatic abridgements of the free-flow of ideas designed to protect the capital investments necessary to produce cultural products like books and newspapers.

When profits replaced church and feudal patronage as a source of support for authors and scribes during the early modern period of European history, the Natural Rights of readers and writers were both advanced and fatefully compromised. They were advanced because more books on more subjects were published in more languages. They were compromised because truth and capital became bedfellows. The original Dr. Faust was, it should be noted, a printer.

Throughout the modern period emerging nation-states would seek to contain the powers of this potent union, sometimes by regulation or control, sometimes by subsidies for non-profit publications. The following anguished passages from John Milton's ground-breaking defense of freedom of expression, Areopagitica (1644), capture the spirit of the historical moment when the state was beginning to treat and regulate knowledge as a commodity: *"Truth and understanding are not such wares as to be monopolized and traded in tickets and statutes and standards. We must not think to make a staple commodity of all knowledge in the land, to mark and license it like our broadcloth and our woolpacks."* In the great historical struggles of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries against taxes on truth, authors and publishers became firm allies.

Print shops functioned as safe houses during the Inquisition, and they became community and regional cultural centers during the Enlightenment. For both practical and ideological reasons printers and publishers led the battles for freedom of expression. The mortal risks some book publishers, e.g. Elsevier, took to preserve manuscripts proscribed by censorship are legendary. In America, the great First Amendment decisions have generally involved suits brought by or charges levied against publishers. In the establishment of Western democracies, then, book publishers were friends of Enlightenment.

Consequently the publishing industry has, until very recently, largely escaped the kind of critical scrutiny that scholars have brought to bear on other media industries. To be sure, many individual authors have complained about the tyrannies of editors or the miserly royalties offered by publishers. On balance, however, the publishing industry has had remarkably good press. Perhaps this is not surprising, from a pagmatic perspective, since it, of course, controls the presses. The industry's claims that its editorial functions are governed by meritocratic principles have gone largely unchallenged.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, free press scholars have viewed the literary marketplace as the nearest approximation of Holmes' ideal marketplace of ideas. The cream, talented but obscure authors of unsolicited manuscripts, sometimes did rise. Reputable book publishers routinely dedicated a

percentage of the profits from their best-sellers to underwrite the publication of quality books on arcane subjects that would appeal to a limited audience. Books, unlike advertising driven media such as newspapers, magazines, and broadcasting, were regarded as relatively free of the coarser contaminants of capital.

The popular image of the gatekeepers of the literary marketplace, cultivated in the literary histories, memoirs, novels, and films of the twentieth century was highly romanticized. The labors of publishers and editors were represented as labors of love. These men and sometimes women of letters were seen as the secular descendents of the old monastic orders; like librarians, their vocation was to defend the word, serve as practical hands to the muses, and preserve and advance civilization. The modest salaries that prevailed within the industry added authenticity to the idea that publishing was motivated by a higher cause. Those who knew them best, authors, characterized them as unsung heroes of the modern world who mentored fledgling authors, championed starving geniuses, and saved famous writers, like Thomas Wolfe and F. Scott Fitzgerald, from themselves.

No more! Within the last three decades the centuries old alliance between authors and publishers has become deeply troubled. The censorship that authors and scholars increasingly worry about today is a censorship imposed by the publishing industry itself: the self-censorship or *market censorship* of the bottom line, the profit principle. Milton's terror is our reality: knowledge, or at least the knowledge preserved in the durable form of books has indeed become a commodity like broadcloth, woolpacks, microwave ovens, bowling shoes, and breakfast cereals. Few publishers today underwrite quality books on esoteric subjects with excess profits from blockbusters. The new marketplace of ideas is a mega-mall.

Book publishing has been brought into the mainstream of corporate capitalism. Conglomerate ownership is now the norm in the book business. Book profits, like corporate other profit centers, help underwrite expenses or losses incurred in other divisions of parent operations. For example, the costs of billion dollar acquisitions, or of mega-mergers that sour such as Time-Warner's acquisition of CNN and its ill-fated alliance with John Malone and TCI. Instead of nurturing promising new authors or preserving esoteric forms of knowledge, profits from best-selling books are used to finance multi-million dollar advances to celebrities, public figures, and newsmakers for the rights to ghost-write their autobiographies. For example, $6.5 million for General Colin Powell, $5 million for Norman Schwartzkopf, $3.5 for O.J. Simpson's former girlfriend, Paula Barbieri.

Grossing more than $20 billion dollars in book sales in 1996 (the highest revenues ever), the U.S. book industry is now subject to the same economic laws as other media industries. Books, like other media, are expected to produce returns of 12 to 15 percent, as compared to profit margins of 4 percent in the days of independent book publishers. Like the newspaper, broadcasting, and cable industries, publishing is now dominated by a small number of very big players who control most of the market. Eight huge global media conglomerates, Hearst, Time Warner, Rupert Murdock's News Corporation, the British giant Pearson, Germany's Bertelsmann, Sumner Redstone's Viacom, S.I. Newhouse's Advance, and

Holtzbrinck currently dominate the publishing industry. In the U.S. only two major independents, Norton and Houghton Mifflin, remain.* The net effect is that the book publishing subsidiaries of these global corporations are now experiencing many of the same demands as advertising supported media industries: increased economies of scale, expansion of export markets, cultural homogenization, speed-ups in production and shorter shelf-life for the product, increased dependence on and responsiveness to conglomerate distribution channels and retail outlets, and pressures to dumb down, tabliodize, and feed sensation.

These developments are alarming because the book industry plays a crucial role in the production and social reproduction of knowledge. It determines what authors, ideas, and forms of knowledge will find their ways into the relatively durable and broadly circulated pages of books.

Book publishing is an important part of the intellectual life of a nation; its impact on educational institutions is direct and pervasive. The modern university has been charged with the task of expanding the frontiers of knowledge. Professors have been expected to publish or perish. Book publishers function as gatekeepers in this process, especially in the humanities and social sciences where access to permanent university positions (tenure) is often available only to professors who have published books.

University presses were founded in order to keep some gates open to specialized (unprofitable) forms of knowledge; however, they are no longer immune to market pressures either. Managers of university presses know that their survival increasingly depends on the production of some profitable trade books that can compete for valuable shelf-space at Barnes and Noble and Borders superstores.

Book publishers play significant roles in processes of shaping what constitutes knowledge, what kinds of knowledge will be widely circulated, amplified, preserved, and developed. They exercise considerable influence in setting the agendas for academic knowledge producers; and the discipline of the bottom line is increasingly defining what frontiers of knowledge will be colonized and what will remain wilderness.

The textbook industry is a very lucrative profit center for publishers. The 'dumbing down' of U.S. public school textbooks is, at least partially, an artifact of the process whereby economies of scale influence national educational standards and priorities. In higher education individual professors, not school boards, select textbooks for purchase by captive student audiences. In selecting textbooks, professors invoke standards of quality, relevance, and suitability for course level. They do not typically consider price, and most would consider it a failure of trust to compromise the quality of the courses they teach on pecuniary grounds. Publishers know this, and so do the bookstore chains that now manage most of the college bookstores in America. Consequently students today typically spend between $300 to $600 each semester for textbooks. It is not uncommon for a single, undergraduate, science or engineering textbook to cost $75 or $100 dollars. As a result, a growing percentage of students no longer buys or reads all of their assigned

textbooks. Dumbing down is now dumbing up the ladders of academe, and compromising the quality of higher learning in America.

Unlike the nostalgia for a past that never was, which pervades much contemporary scholarly discourse about the 'decline of the public sphere,' the 'tragedy of the commons,' or the loss of 'community and civic culture', the dramatic changes that have occurred in the structure, character, and mission of book publishers can be empirically documented. These changes are recent, pervasive, and systemic. We believe they pose profound dangers to the future of literature, scholarship, education, democracy, and perhaps even civilization.

This anthology will examine these changes. It will not simply focus on emerging trends in this rapidly changing industry because much of what is current at the time of writing will be dated when the book is published. Rather our anthology will look at the dynamics of the process, the historical and structural forces that are fueling the transformations, and the positioning of book publishing trends within the big picture of globalization of media, information, and knowledge industries.

As the editors of this anthology, we make no pretense to neutrality regarding current developments in the publishing industry; nor do we claim that our book or the authors who contribute to it are free of the marketing imperatives we condemn. Yet, we recognize that the industry is complex, that there are contradictions within its structures, that these contradictions contain openings to change, and that new technologies for producing and marketing books could conceivably allow authors to successfully bypass the global conglomerates. We encourage contributers to the anthology to explore these contradictions, to reflect on prospects for change, and place their analyses of current trends with historical perspectives. In sum, while we argue that the situation is indeed dire, but we recognize that the Owl of Minerva may be taking wing.

Individual chapters will address such topics as conglomeration within the industry, market censorship, the manufacturing of best-sellers, public relations and cross-marketing strategies, literary agents as marketeers of ideas, celebrity authors and ghostwriters, instant books, marketing of textbooks, the transformation of the role of the editor, the changing nature of texts, electronic publication, and/or other topics suggested by contributers. It will also profile some pioneering initiatives which seek to creatively resist and counter the conglomeration of mind.

The following Chapter Outline is suggestive only. Contributers to this book have been invited to be part of this project because they are recognized experts in the field. We expect that expertise to take us in directions that cannot be fully anticipated in advance. Contributers will, of course, define their own directions and provide chapter titles that reflect their creative preferences.

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These figures are from Mark Crispin Miller, "The Crushing Power of Big Publishing," The Nation, March 17, 1997, pp. 11-18. Millers cites New Press founder, Andre Schiffrin as his source the escalation of book publishing profit margins.

II.

Section Outline, and Tentative Chapter Outline

Forward, B.J. Bullert and Sue Curry Jansen

Part I: The Problem: The Brave New World of Publishing

1. The Marketplace of Ideas, Sue Curry Jansen
2. Big Publishing
3. A Collage of Cautionary Tales

Part II: The Product: The New Republic of Letters

4. Blockbusters: Manufacturing Best-Sellers
5. Celebrity Authors and Their Ghosts
6. Instant Books
7. The Textbook Industry
8. Disappearing Knowledge, Sue Curry Jansen
9. Changing Character of Texts
10. Reports from the Front: Collage

Part III: The Process: Woolpackers and Bookmakers

11. Disappearing Editors
12. The Authority of Authors
13. Rejections
14. The Book Tour
15. Virtual Book Clubs and Electronic Book Marts
16. Literary Agents as Marketeers of Ideas
17. Bookstores
18. Public Relations and Cross-Marketing of Ideas
19. Author! Author! Collage

Part IV: The Prospects: Between Wasteland and Revolution

20. Alternative Presses
21. Utopian Visions
21. Hello Gutenberg! Collage and Epilogue

III.

Contributers

Contributions to the book are being solicited from authors, editors, social scientists, historians, philosophers, poets, critics, media scholars, and free press activists.

IV.

Format

Contributions can take many forms: essays, research reports or notes, case studies, personal accounts, profiles of resistance, cartoons and other graphics, and poetic provocations. Entries may vary in length from a few pages to conventional chapter length (approximately 20 pages, double-spaced plus notes and references).

V.

Market

The projected audience is broadly based: advanced undergraduate students in communication, journalism, library studies, history, sociology, political science, and education; political activists, policy makers, members of freedom of expression watchdog groups, teachers, librarians, and citizens. The objective is to promote debate and to develop frameworks for making judgments.

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VI.

The Editors

Sue Curry Jansen is the author of Censorship: The Knot that Binds Power and Knowledge (Oxford University Press, 1991), as well as other publications on censorship, the politics of knowledge, social theory, news analysis, and media representations of race, gender, and class. She has served on the editorial panels of the International Encyclopedia of Communication, Censorship: An International Encyclopedia, and the Journal of Communication. She received her Ph.D. from SUNY Buffalo. She has taught at SUNY College at Brockport, SUNY Buffalo and SUNY College at Buffalo, and Empire State College; she is currently Associate Professor of Communication at Muhlenberg College.

B.J. Bullert is the author of Public Television: Politics and the Battle Over Documentary Film (Rutgers University Press, 1997). She is currently an Assistant Professor at Muhlenberg College. She received her Ph.D. from the University of

Washington and an M.Litt. from Oxford University. She has also produced and directed several documentaries which have been broadcast on public television, most recently "Earl Robinson: Ballad of an American" (1994).