

# Human IT

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## Busy Being Born or Busy Dying

The Internet and New Combinations of Traditional Professional  
Functions in the Book Trade

by [Johan Svedjedal](#)

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### Abstract

*The first part of this article is concerned with functions in publishing of codex books. The traditional job profile of publishers (or editors) is discussed in connection with a description of profiles of different media. This description uses six variables: text (sequential or multisequential), sound, and pictures (illustrations or moving pictures). There is extensive discussion of different kinds of relationships between authors and publishers, focusing on the "gatekeeping" processes, which are primarily viewed as instances of the publisher's creative influence. After a discussion of the unspoken rules of publishing, the concept of literary responsivity is introduced as an overall term for the author's reactions to comments or expectations from others.*

*The second part examines ways in which functions in the various professions in the traditional book trade can be described. The main functions of the different groups in the traditional "book chain" are analyzed. A new model of functions in the book trade is introduced, providing a new way of describing "the literary process," i.e., the production, distribution, and consumption of literature. This model focuses on functions rather than individuals and institutions. Using a list of twenty-eight crucial functions, it demonstrates how the professional profiles of different groups often overlap. It also provides a checklist which facilitates comparisons between traditional and new jobs in the book trade. ("Clusters of functions of individuals and institutions in the book trade," [Table 1A](#).)*

*The third section begins by highlighting different kinds of quality control in the traditional book chain, then discusses several new kinds of Swedish literary enterprises on the Internet. The section comprises various initiatives in writing, publishing, distributing, selling, and discussing fiction.*

*Two noncommercial sites for publishing fiction are discussed: Wet Warlock and Novell på nätet. A few Print On Demand projects are examined (Swedish authors Peter Curman's, Jan Myrdal's and Lars Forssell's project with Arkitektkopia; Mart Marend's Books-on-Demand), with a background on the historical roots of self-publishing (or "vanity publishing"). These enterprises are shown to combine functions from traditional publishing, printing, and bookselling.*

*A passage on traditional publishers shows that they mainly use the Internet to market their books, not to publish literary works or sell books on-line directly to the customer. A section on Internet bookshops begins with an analysis of book trade functions and marketing strategies at the American on-line bookshop Amazon.com. This leads into to a similar investigation of Swedish Internet bookshops, focusing on four of them (AdLibris, Akademibokhandeln, bokus.com, Internetbokhandeln) and includes a comparison of consumer prices for a selection of books in 1997 and 1998 ([Table 2-3](#)).*

*The concluding section discusses some of the ways in which information concerning Swedish literature is organized on the Internet. Finally, there is a study of the Usenet news group swnet.kultur.litteratur, comprising the total of 113 messages posted there from November 8 to December 10, 1998. Profiles of the discussions and the participants are analyzed, and the social interaction within the news group is related to the concepts of the "public sphere" and the "virtual community."*

*Throughout the third section, the new model of clusters of functions in the book trade is used to describe the profiles of the Internet enterprises in question ([Table 1B](#)). It is shown how they recombine traditional functions in inventive ways, representing new ways of doing things in the book world, but generally sidestep questions of quality control.*

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*Nya vägar för boken (New Ways for the Book Project) (<http://www.kb.se/Nvb/english.htm>) is the Swedish contribution to the larger European project New Book Economy – Building the Information Society. NBE-BIS was initiated by the European Council and is partly financed by the EU program ADAPT. It is currently implemented in six countries: Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Netherlands, and Sweden.*

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## Introduction

The Internet is a multimedia environment, gradually abandoning words for sounds and pictures. This is mainly a consequence of developments in hardware and software. Due to limited bandwidth, the Internet was primarily a medium for the written word during the first few years of its existence. However, with increasing transmission speed, pictures and sounds have become integral parts of the Internet experience. Presumably, TV and computers will merge into a "telecomputer," a screen for writing and viewing. This telecomputer would be the central unit for information and entertainment in every home. Partly mass medium and partly interactive process, the Internet offers the promise of getting everything through one medium: television, films, news, books, pictures, telephone, group conversations. This is the "Meganet" Wilson Dizard predicts.

<sup>1</sup> On the Meganet, it is possible to join and navigate anything, through different kinds of links. Click on a word or a part of a picture, and you are off to new sights and sounds.

We are not there yet. But the Internet and CD-ROMs already give us a fair notion of what such a multimedia environment, or "archive of archives", to use Jerome J.

McGann's phrase, may look like. <sup>2</sup> From this perspective, present technologies are the antennae of the Meganet. Partly information, partly fun and games, the Internet and CD-ROMs give us glimpses of the future of publishing – hints of a world beyond the book.

One instructive example is the CD-ROM *Highway 61 Interactive* (1995), summarizing the career of Bob Dylan. Neither a story nor an encyclopaedia or alphabetic text, this product gives some ideas of how material may be organized in multimedia form. This CD-ROM is explored from a large, jumbled picture, called "the main collage," which consists of several small pictures – a guitar, a typewriter, a ticket stub, a TV screen, a camera, a map, pictures of faces and settings. Most of these pictures are clickable, opening different archives of pictures, sounds and texts. The

main items are a "Scrapbook" (more or less a photo album), a video of the song "Masters of War," the "Bob Dylan Library" (a database of Dylan's lyrics), an "Interactive Timeline" (a chronology), an "Art Gallery" (Dylan's artwork), and a "Photo Gallery".

In addition, there are four settings filled with clickable objects for the user to explore. Entering them is like walking around in interactive museums, where a click on an object may start a video sequence, show a photograph, start an animation or play a sound clip, with or without pictures. These settings are Greenwich Village (in the early 1960s), Columbia Recording Studio (mid-1960s), Coffee House (early 1960s and 1970s, beginning of the Rolling Thunder Revue Tour), and Thirtieth Anniversary Special/backstage (early 1990s, a tribute to Dylan by other artists). Using the "Main Collage" and navigating these settings, there is very little monosequentiality: the user may click objects in any order, use shortcuts and jump in and out of settings. There is no index whatsoever – in this sense, the CD has no ending, no closure. To the user, it is more of mixed bag of surprises than a structured archive. <sup>3</sup>

A few years ago, the information on *Highway 61 Interactive* would have been contained in books instead of on a CD-ROM. And of course, it was. Dylan's life and times were covered in a number of biographies and photography books; Larry Sloman (who shows up in a video sequence on *Highway 61 Interactive*) described Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue in his own book, and Dylan's lyrics were published in several editions. There were films, TV specials, and albums, both official and bootleg. But no medium integrated the material in quite the fashion that *Highway 61 Interactive* does.

Obviously, a CD-ROM cannot hold the amount of material that will make it a truly comprehensive multimedia archive. But the Internet is already a gigantic system of sites – truly a worldwide Web – for the publication of pictures, sounds, and written words. Large parts of the Net actually work like books or newspapers. It is irrelevant whether the material is published once or if it is updated periodically. The important thing is that the Internet, as it works now, is a medium for the public display of the written word.

This may seem like a roundabout way of explaining that the Internet works just like we already know that it does. No Internet user, after all, has to be told that one navigates the Net by reading and clicking. But where are the lines of demarcation between books and other media? What impact will the Internet have on the print culture and on the book market? How will the digital revolution affect professional roles in the book trade? These questions are addressed in the following article.

My viewpoint is generally that of the established print culture (the book, the publishing world, and so on), and the aim was to create theoretical models and find larger patterns rather than to make an inventory of new phenomena on the Internet or of new professions developing around it. The problem is not whether CD-ROMs and new Internet sites will flood the world or not (they will), or whether new professions will be born in the process (they have been and they will continue to be), but what all this will mean to the culture of print, the realm of books. As the saying goes, "he not busy being born/is busy dying". <sup>4</sup> It was first publicly communicated in song, not writing, but regardless of medium, it applies to the book world. Busy being born for the last five hundred years, the community of books now faces new challenges – a media revolution

with an impact on communications of sufficient magnitude to place it somewhere between the invention of moveable type and broadcast television.

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## Books and Other Media

In the broadest sense of the word, a book is almost any portable material with writing on it – thus, there are manuscript books as well as printed books. And they need not be written or printed on paper. As D.C. Greetham remarks, the portable material may be nearly anything: metal, stone, clay, wax, etc. <sup>5</sup> At present, however, the definition of a "book" is generally more restricted. A book is a carrier of text, printed on pages or sheets gathered together in volumes and bound between covers. It is an object that, in our era of the printing press, is manufactured in large quantities to disseminate texts and other kinds of printed material to many readers at different places and times. As previously discussed, the printed material is arranged sequentially in a book and generally intended to be read in that order (although there are many exceptions, such as encyclopedias and practical handbooks). Some other properties of the book are its portability, the possibility to make notes in the text-carrier (i.e. the margins), and a unique or distinctive getup (cover, layout, fonts, etc.). <sup>6</sup>

A distinction must be drawn between the book as a physical object and the work it carries. The work *Hamlet* can be carried by several types of books, from the forbidding scholarly tome to the easy-to-read volume with printed text in large and bold type. These different typographic getups obviously affect the reading experience, but they have nothing to do with the abstract work itself, neither the text, nor the sequence of letters following each other on the page; the letter sequence H-a-m-l-e-t is the same, whether printed in Baskerville, Times or Book Antiqua. But the books differ from each other.

A book carries works in one or two artistic media, words and pictures. Typically, the work is in written words, often with illustrations, sometimes with musical notation. Some books are more ingenious in their use of the print medium, children's books, for example, that use pop-up pictures or flip pages to give the sense of three-dimensional or moving pictures. But what may perhaps be called the "default book" carries written words and fixed illustrations.

As a physical object, the book is multisensory, with distinctive traits in appearance, texture, smell, and sound. These are familiar aspects for every book-lover – consider the sensual difference between handling an eighteenth-century first edition of poems or a newly printed scholarly monograph or a pocket book from the 1940s. Such differences of medium, however, have no bearing on the work carried by the book. You hear the rustling from the pages of *Madame Bovary*, not from Emma Bovary's dress, and smell the scent of the newly printed *Robinson Crusoe*, not the marooned sailor himself. Naturally, texture, sound, and smell may affect the reading experience, but not the work itself.

Many electronic document carriers are multimedia-capable, but some of them actually use fewer modes than the book. All of them carry texts in the sense that the spoken or

sung word is also text. Some carry alphabetical texts: TV and films, CD-ROMs, and the Internet. Reading, listening, and viewing are the basic ways to use these media. Radio, film, CD-ROMs, and Internet documents all have their distinctive profiles, many of them with multimedia capability, but they are also restricted to carrying sequential texts by the very temporality of the medium.

*Profiles of various media*

	Sequential text	Multisequential text	Sound	Illustrations	Moving pictures
Book	x	(x)		x	
Vinyl record	x		x		
Film/TV	x		x	(x)	x
Radio	x		x		
Audio CD	x	x	x		
CD-ROM	x	x	x	x	x
Internet	x	x	x	x	x

Such a comparison reminds us that publishing is generally involved with books (or other print media) and, consequently, that the competence profiles of publishers and editors are geared towards sequential alphabetical texts and illustrations, while they have less experience working with sounds and moving images.

Books can be beautiful. But paradoxically, they are commonly meant to be read, not to be gazed upon. The texts in books are often produced to be materially invisible – that is, to be read and understood without any directing of the attention towards the shape of the letters. As Richard A. Lanham eloquently pointed out in his *The Electronic Word*, the codex book is usually printed for textual "stable transparency," the reader figuratively living in the black and white world of paper and ink. But in the digital environment, the reader has other opportunities – to enlarge the text, substitute fonts freely, change the color of background and text. Lanham reminds us that such artistic devices were used by, for example, early modernists such as Dadaists and Futurists, but remarks that such printings were never more than marginal experiments in the print culture. In digital media, however, the user may again have his or her attention directed towards the text as such, questioning the convention of "stable transparency." The appearance of the text – in the precise meaning of the word – is controlled by the reader, not by the author or the publisher. <sup>7</sup>

In the multicolor world of this new textuality, the user follows a well-trodden path away from black and white to color, a path that has already led to pictorial inventions: color printing, color film, color television, color computer monitors. Behind all of these inventions lie technological advancements. One should note, however, that the innovations in pictorial media all aim for the same goal – the accomplishment that may be called the reality effect. A color photograph, bluntly speaking, gives a better depiction of real scenery than a black and white one – showing the exact shade of blue

in the sea, the different nuances of green in the trees.

This reality effect is not as easily discernible when it comes to printed letters. Should the word "pig" be printed in rounded pink characters rather than in narrow black ones? Such questions are, of course, absurd and unanswerable from the convention of stable transparency now governing print culture. There are no rules or customs to guide us in such choices, other than vague notions that "modernistic" typefaces should be used for "modern" content and preferably "old-fashioned" ones for "old-fashioned" subjects. This may change, but it is difficult to see any real inherent force in such a development, a change of print culture from exclusively black and white to predominately color in the same way that the pictorial arts have changed. The obvious explanation is the matter of readability. Convenience in reading is very much a question of contrast – black on slightly toned white seems to be the best way of preventing eye strain during reading. While readability and the reality effect tend to converge in pictorial arts, they are somewhat antagonistic in print culture.

This may be one reason that the quest for the "electronic book" has become a quest for a gadget that looks like a book but is electronic – a small storage system for text, displayed in "pages" on some kind of screen. There are various handheld computers along these lines. All of them more or less resemble Game-Boys or textual Walkmans, made for downloading text and equipped with fabulous memories. One method is to use "digital ink" on "electronic paper," letters on displays as thin as paper, bound together in volumes and as easy to navigate as printed books. <sup>8</sup> Another technology is the small handheld computer known generically by the brand name "PalmPilot." When using this personal organizer, text is read a few lines at a time on a small digital screen and literary texts can be downloaded via modem. <sup>9</sup> In 1998 several "electronic books," using roughly the same concept were introduced on the market – the SoftBook and the Rocket eBook.

Such "electronic books" all have their apparent advantages (portability, a wide range of selection of works, readability in the dark, and so on), but they are also prime examples of how new technologies try to mimic old ones. As books with memory but without paper, they are devices for reading alphabetical texts in black and white, page by page – not vehicles for multisequential works, hypertexts, color, sounds, moving images or multimedia capability. As a medium, these "electronic books" lack the individuality of the printed book: the distinctive sensuous qualities of a physical object, made to correspond aesthetically with the work it carries.

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## Authors and Publishers

A crude way of describing how a book is produced is to say that the author writes and the publisher sees to it that the work is made into a book and made public. <sup>10</sup> Even literary theory seems to subscribe to this view – in his elaborate theory of the literary process, Siegfried J. Schmidt sees the author (or authors) as the sole producer of literary works, while the publisher is reduced to a mere mediator. <sup>11</sup>

Such distinctions between writing and publishing may seem clear-cut, but in reality they

are often blurred. Frequently, the author and the publisher are partners in the production of works, the author fulfilling some of the publisher's functions and vice versa. For example, many present-day authors work on computers, submitting formatted manuscripts on floppy disks, which means that the texts are essentially typeset at the author's desk. Many authors contribute to the marketing of their books (through lectures, interviews, and public readings), and some finance the publication by paying the publisher out of their own pockets or by guaranteeing grants to cover the printing costs. In many cases, the author is not merely a writer. Conversely, in the world of digital hypertexts, the production of what is called "content" is often a collaborative effort, involving not only authors and publishers, but also artists, programmers, and interface designers. <sup>12</sup>

The history of literature abounds with examples of insensitive publishers, foolish rejections, unsolicited changes in manuscripts or heavy-handed demands for alterations. Such occurrences have become commonplace in the discourse on literature, related both by authors and by literary historians. But they are only part of the truth about publishing, only fragments of the relationship between authors and publishers. Apart from the stories of such outrages, there are many examples of valuable creative influence from publishers. In fact, such publisher influence is to be found at many more artistic levels than one might at first suspect.

John Sutherland has observed that the material factors surrounding literature are neither subtextual nor contextual, but inherently textual <sup>13</sup> That is, literary works are generally shaped by their production processes. Publishers are, obviously, important agents in these processes. They commission works, inspire, encourage, dissuade, or prod gently. They discuss literary works, sometimes from the very conception to the final polishing. They also have the financial power to ensure publication of works that are unprofitable in the short term, thus bolstering the effects of other material factors.

A clarifying comment may be necessary here. In the past, publishing houses were usually dominated by one person, sometimes also run by him or her, or by only a few people. The publisher could read – or at least glance at – all incoming manuscripts, handle correspondence, and be involved in proofreading. Nowadays, the word publisher often means chief executive, the administrative head of a publishing house. In this sense of the word, the publisher seldom has much to do with the literary works published by the firm. Instead, editors deal with the reading and revision of incoming manuscripts within the publishing house – while literary agents tend to fulfil the same role before the manuscripts are even submitted. However, I will use the concept of publishers as a generic term, covering both the old type of "publisher" and present-day "editor." In this context, "publisher" will quite simply refer to the person actually working with manuscripts in a publishing house.

Sometimes the publisher is seen as a gatekeeper, a doorman who lets people in or shuts them out. In some ways, this is a fair description of the role of the publisher. However, one should keep in mind that from one aspect all literary writing could be described as dealing with gatekeepers – getting manuscripts approved by spouses, friends, literary agents, and so on. One general model of gatekeeping distinguishes between four different types of gatekeepers: (1) Primary Groups, (2) Superiors/Coworkers, (3) Representatives, (4) Professional Experts. <sup>14</sup> In this



typology, the publisher is a representative, a gatekeeper embodying the publishing house. The representative has the power to make decisions, to accept or reject, but can ask professional experts for advice – in this case, typically the publisher's readers. From the author's point of view, the literary agent can be another representative, having the power to accept or reject a manuscript as an item for the agency.

What does a gatekeeper do? The truth of the gatekeeping metaphor lies in the details. A publisher is hardly a simple doorman, a person who accepts or rejects manuscripts. As Lewis Coser, Charles Kadushin, and Walter W. Powell remark in their *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing* (1982), publishers cannot be described as mere "gatekeepers of ideas" since they in fact "not only sift ideas but give them shape." <sup>15</sup> Moreover, a publisher is something of a teacher of writing and of the formation of literary taste. From the gatekeeper's point of view, the author must fulfil certain requirements to be allowed to pass – as a user of the language, as a narrator, as a thinker, and as a media personality. The authors who meet these demands best are let in first. From the author's point of view, the publisher is the person in power, a dominating presence to circumvent as quickly and as smoothly as possible. And so the author often does as other people do who want to avoid being turned away by the doorman – he or she dresses appropriately. The easiest way is to choose the right outfit from the beginning, not by adapting to the doorman, but rather according to one's own preference. One will then not have to change, but simply dress according to personal taste. For others, it will often be a matter of modifying their taste, rather than changing outfits or masquerading. Those rejected by the doorman either do not return or dress differently the next time; those rejected by a publisher either cease to write or write in a new way for the next manuscript – or approach a different publisher. By rejecting and accepting, the gatekeeper teaches the implicit norms aspiring authors have to follow. And the authors live and learn – according to the rules of the art.

Some literary works are written by authors with scant regard for the reader's reactions or preferences – an attitude parodied by P.G. Wodehouse (arguably one of this century's great market-driven authors) in the episode where a poet, Rodney Spelvin, reflects on the pressures of being published: "We singers have much to put up with in a crass and materialistic world. Only last week a man, a coarse editor, asked me what my sonnet, "Wine of Desire," meant. [...] I gave him answer, 'twas a sonnet, not a mining prospectus." <sup>16</sup>

Authors like Rodney Spelvin seem unlikely to be influenced by publishers. Literary history is swarming with examples of authors who have resisted pressure from publishers about what to write and how to write. Nevertheless, the opposite goes for many other authors, both in the fields of fiction and nonfiction. It is easy to see that many nonfiction titles are the result of a publisher's idea. Cookbooks, textbooks, and various technical books are often commissioned works, written because the publisher has discovered a niche in the market, perhaps has even had an idea about what kind of writing is required. Publishing history and publishers' memoirs hold many stories of this kind.

A good example is the Village Book. "The Village Series" was published jointly by Pantheon Books in the US, and under the Allen Lane imprint of The Penguin Press in Great Britain. The idea came from Jan Myrdal's *Report from a Chinese Village*,

published as a Pelican reprint by Penguin Books in the early 1960s. In this book, Myrdal described life in a small Chinese village, using interviews and direct speech and combining sociological insights with immediacy and interest in the individual. The commercial and artistic success gave an editor at Penguin, Tony Godwin, the idea to commission a series of books along the same lines, written by different authors. "What we expect each author to do," he wrote to Ronald Blythe on February 17, 1966 "is to take the community and draw together an integrated picture out of all the different threads that go to make up the village." Specifying the kinds of questions the authors had to answer, Godwin in reality gave an outline of the subject matter of the books – the outcome being, among other things, Blythe's modern classic *Akenfield*. <sup>17</sup>

Obviously, editorial influence is seldom a question of authors cringing and fawning before publishers. Rather, there is a slow learning process, semi-conscious or unconscious. How this process develops can, of course, vary enormously. There are various kinds of comments on manuscripts from publishers, from wholesale rewriting of entire manuscripts to offhand and general remarks. Usually, however, the publisher tends to have the greatest influence in the beginning of the authorial career. Budding authors are eager to learn what publishers like and dislike and these publishing norms are slowly internalized as authors receive comments on their manuscripts from agents, publishers, readers, and editors. This, of course, is a slow and reciprocal process, where innovative authors in their turn can influence the gatekeepers, but it is always a question of adjusting sets of literary norms to each other. <sup>18</sup>

In "quality fiction," the author is asked to adhere to rules at the same time he or she is breaking them. This strange mixture is what is known as "originality" or "a personal voice." In essentially formulaic literature, like mass-market paperbacks, the process is somewhat more straightforward, the author often being asked to follow certain specified requirements concerning treatment, style, and subject matter. Sometimes there are even written guidelines, codifying the norms for the genre in question. However, such guidelines tend to be very general. As Eva Hemmungs Wirtén has remarked about Harlequin Enterprises' guidelines (consisting of a total of only six pages for all the different lines), they are "far from writing manuals equipped with a neat package of structure, plot, and character that allows for the rapid construction of new texts." <sup>19</sup>

Consequently, such guidelines provide help for writing, not blueprints for narratives. They give the authors an idea of which subgenre and tradition to write in, but otherwise leave them on their own. However, every author (literary or mass-market) writes within certain traditions, following or denying literary conventions. Every work is situated in an intertextual context, engaged in a dialog with its predecessors. This dialog, known as "intertextuality," may be intended or not: literature is an echo chamber filled with sounds from other works and from literary conventions.

Reading and writing require some knowledge of these traditions and conventions. Jonathan Culler has coined the phrase "literary competence" for the understanding and mastery of these codes. As he points out, literature demands certain skills from the reader. Quite simply, reading and appreciation of literature are the result of long training. "To read a text as literature is not to make one's mind a *tabula rasa* and approach it without preconceptions; one must bring to it an implicit understanding of

the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for." <sup>20</sup> Obviously, the same goes for the writing of literature. Writing may be a solitary business, but the author is at the same time part of a web of literature, a person writing who has learned preconceptions about literary discourse and now tries to put them into practice, presumably to also change them.

If one accepts that reading and writing are connected by the knowledge of "the operations of literary discourse," it follows that it is virtually impossible to retain any conception of an isolated, individual authorial intention. Instead, the nucleus of the "intention" is the author's knowledge of literary conventions, as well as his or her beliefs about the reactions of the reader. The individual intention is a link in an infinite chain of other people's intentions.

So, literature is a social practice not only because literature depicts social realities (or possibilities), but also because literature exists in a social interplay between the author and the world surrounding him or her. Influences from the publisher are a part of this creative interplay between author and audience. Once again, mass-market literature and light reading are often the kinds of works most evidently affected by revisions and rewrites requested by the publisher. Bestsellers are very often the result of intense editorial work, stretching from the very idea for the book to the final wording of the manuscript. <sup>21</sup>

The terms and stipulations in contracts can affect the form of a literary work – John Sutherland aptly talks about "the shaping power of contract" <sup>22</sup> – for example by forcing the author to write in installments or for a certain format. However, the influence of the publisher is generally more discernible in his or her comments on the manuscript. Often, the authors accept such criticism and advice, thereby strengthening the work artistically.

One prime example of such editorial influence is Maxwell Perkins, legendary editor at Scribners for Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Perkins was partly responsible for the intricate structure of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald sent Perkins the manuscript, somewhat exasperated with his own inability to get the story absolutely right ("There are things in it I'm not satisfied with, in the middle of the book"). <sup>23</sup> Perkins read the manuscript with admiration and praise, but remarked that the narrative did not hold together seamlessly and that the problem lay in the description of the protagonist Jay Gatsby. Perkins suggested that Fitzgerald should drop some hints, feeding the curiosity of the reader and making Gatsby come more alive. Perkins imparted his criticism in a letter which is a model of its kind – the editorial midwifery:

*One is that among a set of characters marvelously palpable and vital – I would know Tom Buchanan if I met him on the street and would avoid him – Gatsby is somewhat vague. The reader's eyes can never quite focus upon him, his outlines are dim. Now everything about Gatsby is more or less a mystery, i.e. more or less vague, and this may be somewhat of an artistic intention, but I think it is mistaken. Couldn't he be physically described as distinctly as the others, and couldn't you add one or two characteristics like the use of that phrase "old sport" – not verbal, but physical ones,*

perhaps. [---]

*The other point is also about Gatsby: his career must remain mysterious, of course. But in the end you make it pretty clear that his wealth came through his connection with Wolfsheim. You also suggest this much earlier. Now almost all readers numerically are going to be puzzled by his having all this wealth and are going to feel entitled to an explanation. To give a distinct and definite one would be, of course, utterly absurd. It did occur to me, though, that you might here and there interpolate some phrases, and possibly incidents, little touches of various kinds, that would suggest that he was in some active way mysteriously engaged. You do have him called on the telephone, but couldn't he be seen once or twice consulting at his parties with people of some sort of mysterious significance, from the political, the gambling, the sporting world, or whatever it may be. I know I am floundering, but that fact may help you to see what I mean. The total lack of an explanation through so large a part of the story does seem to me a defect – or not of an explanation, but of a suggestion of an explanation. I wish you were here so I could talk about it to you, for then I know I could at least make you understand what I mean. What Gatsby did ought never to be definitely imparted, even if it could be. Whether he was an innocent tool in the hands of somebody else, or to what degree he was this, ought not to be explained. But if some sort of business activity of his were simply adumbrated, it would lend further probability to that part of the story. There is one other point: in giving deliberately Gatsby's biography, when he gives it to the narrator, you do depart from the method of the narrative in some degree, for otherwise almost everything is told, and beautifully told, in the regular flow of it, in the succession of events or in accompaniment with them. But you can't avoid the biography altogether. I thought you might find ways to let the truth of some of his claims like [reading at] "Oxford" and his army career come out, bit by bit, in the course of actual narrative.* <sup>24</sup>

Fitzgerald gratefully accepted the advice, interpolating some descriptions of Gatsby and, more importantly, inserting some further clues concerning Gatsby's shady business enterprises, as well as breaking up Gatsby's biography. Later, Fitzgerald acknowledged Perkins' importance for the artistic impact of the novel. Musing on the reviews, he wrote: "Max, it amuses me when praise comes in on the 'structure' of the book – because it was you who fixed up the structure, not me." <sup>25</sup>

It would be easy to cite many similar instances of editorial influence. Recently, textual critic Jerome J. McGann has done much to encourage the historical study of literary production along these lines, vitalizing the discussion of the extent of co-creation in literary works. From the point of view of the academic publisher, Richard Abel has made the case for what he calls the "Ingenious Book Publisher," unfolding a number of functions provided by this ideal publisher. This Ingenious Book Publisher "spends a good deal of time building and maintaining an in-depth intellectual and historical understanding of the subject matter and literature of the fields or niches in which the firm publishes," with the purpose of evaluating manuscripts and enabling the publishers to identify subjects for books and prospective authors. The publisher contacts these authors, pointing out that an author does not have to write well, since "the mastery of

language is one of the strengths possessed by the publisher and that any deficiencies in the text will be rectified at the editorial stage." The publisher helps to form the outline of a work, monitors the writing, maybe even rewrites the manuscript. Who then is the real creator?

*Obviously, the conventionally accepted roles of both publisher and author begin to blur. The publisher has first identified the subject, then identified and solicited the author; has taken an active role in the shaping of the manuscript; has ensured the structure and substance of the final manuscript by monitoring and editorial intervention; and may have actually written or rewritten a significant portion – occasionally the entirety – of the manuscript. In such extreme cases, the IBP [Ingenious Book Publisher] assumes the role of the author, and the author simply becomes a research assistant. [26](#)*

Such examples, however, provide only one aspect of the interplay between author and editor. When Thomas Carlyle described a publishing house as a combination of stock exchange and cathedral, he did not in reality point out a contradiction but rather two different time levels in publishing – investments in the short run and in the long run. A "literary publisher" – or a "quality publisher" – must have the economic stamina to wait for profit from his publishing enterprises. If one does not have that stamina, it is difficult to become a literary publisher. Publishing can be described as a short-term cash flow problem solved only in the long run; to act as a publisher is to take the economic risk, and probably (but not definitely) get one's money back later.

It is easy to see what this means for the relationship between authors and publishers. In the best of worlds, the publisher advances the funding, letting the author build a literary career, even if the books are not bestsellers or even steady sellers. Actually, the economic rewards can be larger for authors with initially small sales. In "the literary field," to use Pierre Bourdieu's concept, the most esteemed practitioners often combine modest sales figures with artistic strategies considered to be advanced or avant-garde. This goes for both authors and publishers. And so the publishing house pays for prestige by publishing unprofitable authors, while the authors in return get money and publishing opportunities. In Bourdieu's concept, literary capital is exchanged for economic capital. This explains how a small literary publisher may actually lose prestige by publishing an author who sells too much. As Bourdieu observes, the literary field traditionally sees an opposition between literary and economic capital, which in practice means that economic profits ideally only come in the long run. Therefore, the publisher is needed to advance money for publishing in the short run. [27](#)

So far, Pierre Bourdieu has framed the most sophisticated theory concerning the literary market. It is a macro-theory of literary creation. His model covers most aspects of literary publishing since it takes into account literary capital alongside economic capital. His theory is also convenient for describing the common division of labor between publisher and author. The publisher generally talks about the economic capital ("sales figures", "market pressures") while the author speaks of literary capital ("intentions", "aesthetics"). The publisher relieves the author of concerns about economic pressures and profitability. Each must consider both kinds of capital, but the publisher allows the author to specialize in literary capital.

Everybody knows that authors want to make literature and that publishers want to make money, either in the short or in the long run. But this is only part of the truth. Generally, authors are also interested in money and publishers in literature – that is why a publisher may publish books that are not in any way profitable for the firm. Furthermore, an author may very well receive literary capital from his or her publisher. Authors may switch publishers because of material considerations (better editors, higher advances, superior distribution), but another reason may be that they want to enhance their standing in the literary community. The higher the status of the publishing firm, the better the reputation of the author published there – with improved chances for respectful treatment in the press, literary prizes, and so on. This process explains why tradition has such a crucial role in the publishing world. The glow of earlier literary successes from a publishing house extends to the literary debutante, the first-book author who suddenly finds himself or herself in the magic circle of high-profile publishing.

In short, the name of the publishing firm is an important trademark – which the publisher, of course, protects by not accepting manuscripts by authors who diverge too much from the established profile of the publishing house. A published book is a commodity brought into the world with two trademarks. One is the author's name, the other is the publisher's.

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## Literary Responsivity and the Unspoken Rules of Publishing

In the final analysis, the creative interplay between author and publisher is no more than an instance of general human interaction. The psychological aspect of this interaction has been labeled *social responsivity* – i.e., the elementary human need for interaction, for relations, response and sympathy. Social responsivity is the interplay between two or more people. A conversation, two people redecorating a room together – both are situations of social responsivity. Such interplay evolves without any formalized sets of rules – a certain stimulus does not cause a given response – which means that social responsivity is improvised, the situation changes as people go along. The opposite of social responsivity is called *asocial unresponsivity*, meaning isolation and blocking out of human contact. Such unresponsivity is also a basic human need, but in excess it results in deprivation and pain. This is why solitary confinement is considered such a severe punishment and why Hell is often depicted as a place where people are cut off from each other.

Human life oscillates between these two poles, responsivity and unresponsivity, and people have a general psychological urge to have both needs fulfilled. However, social responsivity is a basic human need – people have a natural need to be seen, understood and accepted, often so much that their responsivity can turn into what George Herbert Mead has called "role taking," i.e., a person's adaptation of his or her behavior to what he or she thinks another person wants. [28](#)

It is easy to see that relations between authors and publishers are forms of social

responsivity, often turning into role taking and sometimes into asocial unresponsivity following rejections, disagreements or misunderstandings. It could be argued that not much is won by labeling such a relationship (one could just as well talk about a creative interplay), but the point is that such a label helps to trace this interplay back to a basic human need. From the author's point of view, his or her relations with the publisher are nothing more than a part of the general need to be seen and understood. Ideally, the publisher recognizes the author's intentions – or can influence them in an ongoing interaction.

However, this relationship is constantly molded by the surrounding world. The publisher must consider the economic side of things – the readers, the market, or whatever term one chooses – and is thereby a representative for the audience. Hence, the relationship between author and publisher is largely a model case of the relationship between author and reader. Ideally, the publisher is a deputy reader, a last resort for testing the literary work before it is handed over to the audience.

Handing over the work involves a number of questions for the author. Is the work aesthetically valid? Do I make myself understood? What response will I get? The author's own reactions to these questions might be called *literary responsivity* – that is, the need for relationships, sympathy, and response in the literary life.

Such literary responsivity is safeguarded by a number of unspoken rules, codes for behavior that guide relations between authors and publishers. The main points in these codes can be phrased as follows, albeit there are manifold rules for different situations as well as times when the main points simply do not apply.

- The publisher has the right to make detailed suggestions for changes in the manuscript – but the author has the final decision to approve or deny these proposals.
- The publisher may suggest cuts and rewritings, but rarely offer additions to the work. Only in exceptional cases may a publisher suggest certain sentences to be written into the work.
- Cuts are to be justified with aesthetic reasons, not moral or political ones.
- A literary debutante is expected to accept suggestions for changes more readily than an established author.
- The publisher must not let it be known that he or she has influenced the author – and the author must not acknowledge too much influence from the publisher.

The paradox is that the relationship between author and publisher is a situation of social responsivity which has to be represented as an instance of asocial unresponsivity. Generally, both participants find it blameworthy to confess that an author has been influenced or guided by a publisher. But in reality, such processes of influence can be studied, often in detail, in correspondences between authors and publishers. There are fragments found in the annals of publishing of the conversations surrounding literary creation. Bundles of letters hold faint echoes of the literary responsivity inherent in all writing.

And yet – the rope can exist without the knot, but the knot never without the rope. Similarly, the author can manage without the publisher, but not the other way around. The publisher is one of the middlemen introduced between the author and the reader

during the age of mechanical book production (the printer and the literary agent are other persons able to shape and reshape a work). The influence of such middlemen should be acknowledged and studied, but not exaggerated. A visionary, a daydreamer, a master of language games, or a mere writer – the author, not the publisher, writes the books.

The publisher's contribution to the work – however important it may be – should never be taken for granted. Many publishers do not comment upon their authors' manuscripts. Furthermore, there are stupid publishers, ignorant, malicious, mean or lying publishers – not to mention publishers with bad taste and deplorable business sense. Stories of such creatures turn up in literary history as regularly as the bad penny in the old adage.

But very often, publishers have other and more supportive roles. The publisher relays signals from the audience to the author, working on his or her literary responsivity. Whatever the author may wish to do – entertain, teach, provoke – the publisher represents the reader. The publisher contributes to the creative process by inspiring, teaching, and providing status. He is the invisible guest at the authorial desk.

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## Functions in Publishing

There is an abundance of definitions of publishing, but even publishers seem to disagree about what it is they do. When the Swedish book trade magazine *Svensk bokhandel* asked some publishers to define their activities, the answers were puzzlingly different. The basic definition of a publisher, according to one, is "a company which undertakes to publish and distribute books." "A publisher manufactures books, CD-ROMs, and videos," one executive answered. "There are two kinds," another one said. "One who gives people what they want, and another one who tries to create trends. The one who creates is made to suffer a great deal." A succinct definition along these lines was given by another executive. A publisher, she said, is "someone who adds value between text and reader." [29](#)

Obviously, these publishers disagree both on what they publish and on what the act of publishing means. For some of them, texts seem to be the only product going – others include media such as videos and CD-ROMs. Some are reluctant to define what it is to publish a book – others seem to find creativity at the center of the publishing process.

Examples like these are a reminder that publishing firms vary in ambition, tradition, and self-definition. Historically, there have been various niches in the publishing world, from specialized mass-market publishers to high-profile avant-garde publishers, from scholarly publishers to trade publishers and from picture-book publishers to firms specializing in advanced textbooks for university education. There have been book publishers, magazine publishers, and newspaper publishers.

However, the very permanence of the term "publisher" seems to indicate that all these businesses have something in common. Moreover, if we are to talk about Internet publishing, then these characteristics (or at least some of them) are to be found in the



digital environment. In many ways, the Internet can be seen as the latest stage in the advancements of technology that have facilitated the publication and dissemination of the written word.

Publishing, as we now know it, has been in existence as a distinct business for a few hundred years. Earlier on, the printer, publisher, and bookseller often were the same person, merging all functions into one. But gradually, specialization evolved in the book trade, giving birth to professional categories like "printer," "publisher," "wholesale bookseller," and "retail bookseller." The process was slow and far from universal. However, in the major European countries, this divergence between different categories was general during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>30</sup> The publisher did not sell books directly to the public; the publisher did not own his printing press; the printer and the bookseller did not pay for the publication of books.

The English verb "publish" literally means "to make public." A publisher is a person who makes the contents of a manuscript public, by printing it. The same goes for the French word *publier*. But in German and in Swedish, the word for "publisher" is in a slightly different semantic field. The German word *Verleger* and its Swedish counterpart *förläggare* are more of a commercial concept. The Swedish verb *förlägga* had two meanings, on the one hand "to pay, to remunerate," and on the other hand "to withhold, to misplace." These two dimensions are, as publishing historian Bo Peterson has pointed out, united in the words *förlägga* (publish) and *förlag* (publishing house).<sup>31</sup>

The *Verlag* system (in Swedish: *förlags-system*) was a means of organizing production during the early stages of capitalism. It was an outsourcing or piecework system where the *Verleger* was a businessman who advanced the raw materials to the craftsman, who usually worked at home with his own tools. This system, which was widespread in Europe from the late Middle Ages, meant that the *Verleger* financed large parts of the production, gradually transforming the craftsman into an industrial worker – and himself into a factory owner. But the *Verleger* was not primarily an industrialist. Rather, he was a financier, the person who ventured the money for manufacturing projects, at the same time that he tried to control resources, distribution channels, and markets.<sup>32</sup> It follows that the central meaning of the words *Verleger/förläggare* comes very close to that of *capitalist*: literally a person who ventures capital, who finances commercial ventures in order to make a profit.

As Bo Peterson observes, the relationship between author and publisher in modern trade publishing is in reality a remnant of this ancient system for the production of goods.<sup>33</sup> The publisher risks money by purchasing products (manuscripts) from subcontractors (authors), sometimes paying in advance. The authors, on their side, work at home with their own tools, risking their time and labor, sometimes producing for the publisher who has paid them in advance, and otherwise choosing the publishing house which seems likely to give them the best terms. Customarily the author is a free subcontractor. There are no publishing factories, seldom any monthly salaries or time clocks in the profession of writing.

The publisher helps to finance the work of these subcontractors. But the modern publisher does more than simply advance the money for the publication of books or other documents. Publishing consists of various interlinked functions, ideally all present

in the publishing process, but in reality often combined in different ways in each case.

So what does a publisher do? In a recent discussion on electronic publishing, Arnoud de Kemp (from Springer-Verlag) saw the publisher's basic role as threefold: "selecting, reviewing, and filtering information." And literary sociologist Robert Escarpit once boldly summarized the publisher's role in three words – to choose, manufacture, and distribute. <sup>34</sup>

Such descriptions fit many publishing functions, but at the same time seem too sweeping to outline the functions involved in publishing.

In an article in the encyclopedia *International Book Publishing* (1995), Czeslaw Jan Grycz tries to discern the various stages in the publishing process. According to Grycz, the "overall process of publishing could generally be described as including the following discrete stages": acquisitions, editing, design, typesetting, proofreading, layout, page makeup, printing, binding, warehousing, and fulfillment. <sup>35</sup> It should be noted that this is a description of the publishing process, not of the job profiles of the publisher (and his or her staff). Typesetting, printing, binding, and warehousing, for example, are often external to the publishing house. The publishers pay, but the work can be carried out by specialized individuals or firms – compositors, printers, and so on.

Grycz gives an admirable description of most of the stages of book publishing. Nevertheless, his account omits some of the crucial parts in the traditional publishing process, namely parts of the processes of production and reception. Starting with the acquisition of a manuscript, Grycz's description seems to suggest that authors typically offer the publisher a finished, rounded-off work written without any contacts with the publisher and oblivious to his or her preferences. What remains of the creative process, then, is the editing of the manuscript.

This may certainly often be the case. Many successful works are written entirely without any contact whatsoever between author and publisher, the composition made without any thoughts of publishing profiles or strategies. But as earlier examples have shown, the composition may also be aided – even guided – by the publisher.

In conclusion, the functions ideally involved in the publishing process can be boiled down to these main points: inspiration, selection, acquisition, consecration, editing, design, typesetting, proofreading, printing, binding, warehousing, marketing, selling. By filling these various functions, the traditional publisher finances the publication of books. Not all functions are present in all publishing enterprises, and some (perhaps even most) of the functions can be provided by other firms. Furthermore, each function can be subdivided and can have various degrees of creativity – "inspiration" can be giving the actual idea for a book, or providing encouragement during the writing; "editing" may mean anything from rewriting a plodding manuscript to the correction of a handful of trivial mistakes in punctuation; the scope of "design" goes from creating an entirely new way of presenting text and pictures (for example in technical handbooks) to merely using the typeface of a book published elsewhere as a model.

Thus qualified, this is a checklist of the traditional book publisher's main functions. Even if several of them are lacking in many modern publishing processes, the checklist

also describes the backbone of digital publishing in the broadest sense of the term – from manufacturing printed books with the help of computers to the publishing of digital hyperworks on the Internet.

As an industrial enterprise, publishing has always tried to combine two aims: the lowest possible cost per unit and the lowest overall cost. These aims seem to be incompatible. Initial investments are high for books (the cost of typesetting, editing and proofreading is the same regardless of the number of copies printed), but at the same time, the cost per unit diminishes rapidly with the size of the edition. Traditionally, the publisher has endeavored to outguess the audience by printing the number of copies that will be sufficient, neither too small nor too large. The computerization of the publishing industry, however, seems to hold the promise that the parameters on the cost-estimate sheet will be thoroughly changed. The dramatic advances in typesetting and printing technology during recent decades have opened the possibilities for automating parts of the publishing process – and thereby reducing costs.

These possibilities are familiar to all involved in writing and publishing. Editing and proofreading are facilitated by automatic spell checkers (often included in word processing programs like Microsoft Word and sometimes used by authors before they submit manuscripts). Typesetting is made easier when authors deliver their works on floppy disks (or as e-mail attachments) and the files are dumped into a desktop publishing program, which semi-automatically takes care of the design of the pages. Printing and binding costs can be reduced for small editions by using Print On Demand technology, which also virtually eliminates expenditures for warehousing. And it is perfectly possible to market and sell a book using e-mail and Internet sites. The investments in equipment, software, and Internet links will only amount to approximately \$3,200, thus opening a worldwide market. All in all, the result is a drastic reduction of costs for publishing enterprises.

In matters of aesthetic judgement, automation can seldom replace human beings. A spell checker program discovers simple mistakes, but has severe difficulties in discerning nuances or suggesting more drastic revisions. A desktop publishing program can hardly simulate how the human eye views the page as a whole. One way of looking at the process of digitization in publishing is, therefore, to say that computers bring new tools to old professional categories – composers working at keyboards instead of with types and cases, and so on.

This may hold true in many cases, since traditional publishing houses are flourishing using computer technology. But change in the publishing world is much more radical than merely increasing cost-effectiveness. Computerization is placing new demands on traditional professional categories, even as new ones are emerging. These new professions combine functions in the book trade – and in the digital communities – in new ways, continuing the transformations in job profiles that have historically characterized the book trade.

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