Behind the Book:
The Current State of the Publishing Industry

Directed and produced by
Christina Coulterson

With research by
Christine Coulter, Brett Fabian, Lucy Lau, Oscar Lo,
Christian Tweedy, and Emilie Vachon

Starring
Russell Blake Jr., Jessica Brown, Walter Dunst,
Eleanor de Pub, and Gerald Richter
SYNOPSIS

The year is 2035. Cable television subscriptions have plummeted with the vast variety and unparalleled convenience provided by Netflix; traditional radio has all but succumbed to an overwhelming preference for DIY playlists and online podcasts; the box office has become a battle of shorts, where even the most action-packed thriller exceeds no more than 30 minutes; and the book publishing industry has haplessly stagnated as it continues to act as contested grounds for which the age-old debate of print or electronic rages on. Behind the Book: The Current State of the Publishing Industry outlines this changing state of publishing, following Amazon’s success in securing book pricing with Hachette and subsequently, the remaining publishers of the “Big 5.” Featuring interviews with both readers and industry professionals, the film illustrates the continued struggle of traditional publishing houses to effectively thrive in a growing electronic book market. The insights of those interviewed reveal conditions that are not entirely dissimilar to those seen at the height of the initial Amazon and Hachette dispute twenty years previous: traditional publishing houses are failing to meet the changing preferences of readers and are therefore, becoming increasingly obsolete in the evolving book market.
CAST

Name: Gerald Richter
Occupation: Senior Market Analyst, K&P Market Associates

Speaking from a market-driven ideological standpoint, market analyst Gerald Richter does not hold back any punches when describing the former and current states of the publishing industry. Richter draws on Greenfield (2014), stating that: “How Apple and Barnes & Noble were able to loosen Amazon’s stranglehold on eBooks is now a matter of public record. The five big publishers were indicted and found guilty by a federal court of collusion of price fixing.” Richter further argues that the sole purpose of production is consumption and that, through a thoroughgoing understanding of this equation, Amazon is successfully able to exercise its market power to benefit its consumers (Worstall, 2014). Because Amazon is in direct competition with a slew of other online giants that are looking in any shape, way or form to stay ahead, Richter believes that it is in Amazon’s best interest to maintain low prices on its print and eBooks so that its competitors will continue to opt out of entering the online book market (Kerr, 2014). The traditional publishing industry has also become stagnant due to an outdated business model with many prospective authors simply choosing other publishing alternatives (Treanor, 2010).
Name: Eleanor de Pub
Occupation: Senior Editor, DSR Publishing

As a self-described “one woman show” at one of the few remaining publishing houses in the world, Eleanor de Pub lends a satirical voice to the publishing industry and its discernible failure in adapting to an increasingly electronic book market and a “shrinking” (Lloyd, 2008, p. 8) attention economy. Although Page (2012) argues that traditional publishing houses have worked to embrace the digital through supplementary sales in eBooks, online learning courses, and digital publishing, these remain largely negligible when compared to the rapid pace in which online retailers such as Amazon have revolutionized both reading and publishing in the mass market.

Indeed, as Lloyd (2008) suggests, traditional publishers have been slow to employ web techniques in the promotion and sale of books, both in print and online, and in digital formats. This, in turn, has allowed eBook sales to soar significantly past those of print books (Arnold-Ratliff, 2013; Flood, 2013) while also giving Amazon the upper hand in online book pricing negotiations. At best “slow and unimaginative” (Harkaway, 2012, para. 11) and at worst a “dinosaur” (Kawasaki; as cited in Pozin, 2014, para. 17)—having naively mistaken the meteor of online booksellers and self-publishing in the sky for dust—de Pub therefore personifies the struggle of today’s traditional publishing houses to successfully thrive in the book market of tomorrow.
Jessica Brown is an 18-year-old first year student at Simon Fraser University. As a digital native, Brown represents an important demographic in the study of the publishing world and emerging technologies (Pew Research, 2014). Most modern young adults "have higher rates of technology adoption than older adults, with 98% of those under 30 using the internet, and … over three-quarters (77%) of younger Americans have a smartphone, and many also have a tablet (38%) or e-reader (24%)" (Rainie & Zickuhr, 2014, para. 20). Brown reads predominantly in electronic format, and has not owned a print book since a very young age. Like many of her peers, Brown has a short attention span, and prefers succinct books that can keep her attention (Manjoo, 2013). She buys her books exclusively in electronic format, and mostly from Amazon. She likes authors like Russell Blake Jr. who provide short and exciting books that can hold her attention for the entire length. Brown helps to illustrate a demographic of avid young readers with evolving reading habits: university students. As university students increasingly prefer electronic material over print, libraries will need to evolve and adapt. Essentially all information will need to be available in digital format and librarians will need to channel their efforts into helping students learn and understand this digital information (Lippincott, 2005). Students like Jessica will need help finding and understanding academic sources, and librarians will need to be able to provide these services for them (Lippincott, 2005).
Name: Walter Dunst
Occupation: Author and philosophy fiction writer, DSR Publishing

The character of Walter Dunst portrays the struggling future of traditional authors who fail to adjust to the emerging paradigm of self-publishing. While Dunst's dismal predicament appears at first to be grossly exaggerated, a look at the current trends and predictions suggest that such a fate is certainly within the realm of possibility. A victory for Amazon has been theorized to set an example and deter opposition from other publishers in the future (Cueto, 2014). Unable to keep books at a reasonable price, small and large publishing houses alike cannot hope to function properly given that "their profit margins have ... eroded over the years" (Cueto, 2014, para. 16). The fall of publishers from prominence means that other literary professionals, namely literary agents, will follow suit. Renowned agent Andrew Wylie admits that agents "[don't] just need publishers to be 'effective', it needs them to survive" (Shephard, 2014, para. 12). Hence, without institutions to support them, authors are left with little alternative but to self-publish. Furthermore, Dunst's adamant defense of publishing houses stems from the belief that traditional publishers play an important role in enriching and diversifying society's culture (Johnson, 2014). This is because publishers take chances on ideas of unknown authors with advances that provide the authors with the time and freedom to write their books (Authors United, 2014) that they would otherwise have spent working wage jobs to survive. These ideas would not have found their way into the marketplace nor the culture without assistance from traditional publishers, a service that Amazon notably has no substitute for (Shephard, 2014). It can therefore be said that Dunst's character embodies an alternative to the profit oriented perspective of publishing.
Name: Russell Blake Jr.
Occupation: Self-published author, Amazon

As a successful author publishing exclusively with Amazon, Russell Blake Jr. offers a vision of the future for an already prolific field of self-taught, self-grown, and self-publishing writers. Having originally struggled to earn a living with traditional publishing houses, Blake Jr. was lured to Amazon’s self-publishing program through its offering of 70% royalties to its authors—a number that is significantly higher than the 15% offered by others (Alter, 2014; Henn, 2014). He has since become a household name, earning hundreds of thousands in profits and adding to a growing number of self-published titles that, in 2013, accounted for 32% of the 100 top selling eBooks on Amazon (Alter, 2014). This number has undoubtedly seen a sizeable increase during a time in which the ability to “post a novel online and watch the revenue pour in by direct deposit” (Hughes, 2013, para. 13) has made the publishing industry all but irrelevant. However, by writing committedly on a “quantity over quality” basis—one that has allowed him to produce 25 books in the last 30 months in an effort to “keep pace” (Alter, 2014, para. 18) with readers’ expectations—Blake Jr. also brings into question the significance of text quality in the changing world of literature. Although he contends that he is simply responding to market demands, his bottom line-driven approach threatens the “art” (Chalmers, 2014, para. 6) of publishing as well as the hard work, perfectionism, and improvement that, according to Chalmers (2014), should be essential in both the production of a text and the growth of a writer. Therefore, although Blake Jr. may exemplify the growing possibilities of success for self-published writers in an increasingly digitized book market, he also draws attention to the vital roles of traditional publishing houses in quality text control, editing, and self-growth and development.
LOOKING AHEAD

Despite its seemingly hyperbolic vision, *Behind the Book: The Current State of the Publishing Industry* presents a future of the book that is consistent with trends seen twenty years previous. From a market-driven standpoint, the business tactics of Amazon are not only precedent setting but also perfectly reasonable given that they follow practical economic logic. This has posed new challenges for traditional publishing houses that are struggling to maintain their roles in a rapidly evolving book market and are therefore, quickly losing relevance in the industry of tomorrow. Corresponding with these changes is a growing preference for reading in electronic formats and the unfortunate dwindling of young readers’ attention spans. Meanwhile, the self-publishing model provided by Amazon and other online services are providing writers a more efficient and cost-effective chance at success that is, in many ways, more suitable for the increasingly digitized market.

As such, it becomes evident that traditional publishing houses cannot continue their craft without making the appropriate changes to ensure their survival in a world of writing that now effectively blurs the lines between authors, readers, and critics. Although traditional publishers may need to consider structural changes that explore alternative avenues in the production and sale of texts such as developing a personal brand or targeting niche markets, their roles in quality text control, professional editing, and in a writer’s self-growth and development should not be underestimated nor overlooked. Despite the possibilities that a predominantly electronic book market can provide for both writers and readers, the art of traditional publishing should and cannot be compromised in this shift. For as long as texts of the utmost quality and cultural value are being produced, there will continue to be a market for them.
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