

From Gentlemanly Publishing to Conglomerates: The Contemporary Literary Field in the UK

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Introduction

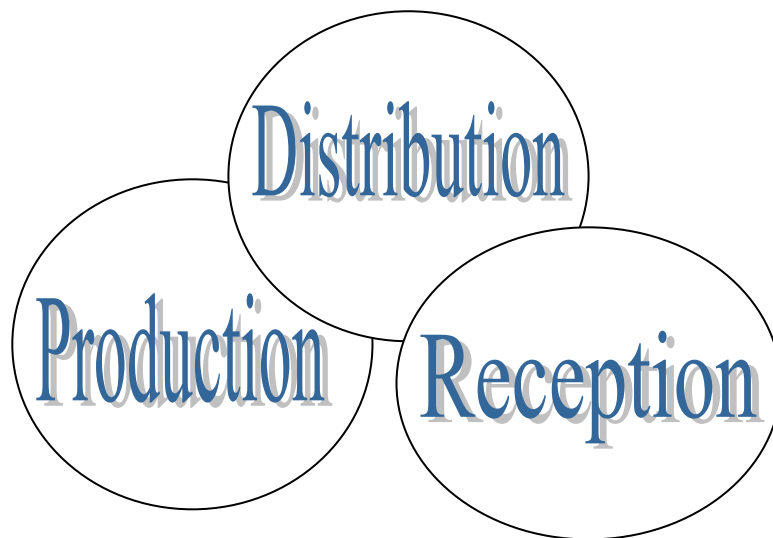
Publishing is an industry like any other and books are published on their perceived ability to make money. Literary merit is often merely an added bonus. [...] It's in no one's interest to tell our finest authors that something isn't working or that 100 pages could safely be cut without anyone noticing. Schedules would be disrupted, departments would miss budget, the company share price would fall and, to make matters even worse, the authors might take their next books to a different publishing house. All in all, everyone would be very pissed off indeed. Far better to keep quiet, roll out a high-profile PR and marketing campaign and wait for the money to roll in. (Crace)

This trenchant portrait of the current trends in the literary field in the UK pinpoints the two key issues which I will deal with in my paper: commercialisation on the one hand and literary or cultural merit on the other. Many authors, publishers and readers oscillate between these two poles. First, I will look at commercialisation and how it has affected the literary field. Next, I will explore the different ways of resisting commercialisation and then sum up my preliminary findings, always with the methodological question in mind how one can adequately analyse the contemporary

literary field. I will concentrate on the literary field in the UK with a few asides concerning the US, France and Germany when this seems appropriate.

Commercialisation

The literary field involves many different players, institutions and processes. The key object is – of course – the book. The three overlapping phases of the life of a book – production, distribution and reception – are all affected by commercialisation.



Production is affected by the initial question: what gets produced in the first place, and how? What kinds of books do writers write and what kinds of books are publishers willing to produce nowadays? Next, distribution: which books do booksellers stock, do libraries acquire and literary festivals promote? Finally, reception: what do readers buy and read, what do members of book clubs discuss and what kind of books do reviewers, TV hosts and radio journalists promote in their shows and reviews? None of these questions can be answered in isolation – not from each other, but mainly not isolated from wider social, political, cultural and economic concerns.

In the last two or three decades, the literary fields throughout the Western world have all been affected by rapid change and a much more pronounced commercialisation

than in earlier centuries. This is surprisingly late, compared say to the music industry or the theatre world, as far as one can judge from the work done by Rita Gerlach or Christian Handke (see their contributions to this publication). Ever since the nineteenth century at the very latest, the literary field has of course grappled with the problem of how to reconcile art with commerce. In fact, one of Pierre Bourdieu's central contentions – it is he of course who coined the term “literary field” (Bourdieu) – is that this opposition between art and commerce produces the key tension within the literary field: on the one hand, artists grapple for legitimacy, for artistic recognition and on the other, commercial success is what publishers vie for.

A UK-adapted version of Bourdieu's model could look like this:

high degree of autonomy	
high degree of recognition/legitimacy	
poetry prizes TLS/LRB ¹ etc.; institutions	reading groups TV/media bestsellers
low degree of recognition/legitimacy	
low degree of autonomy	

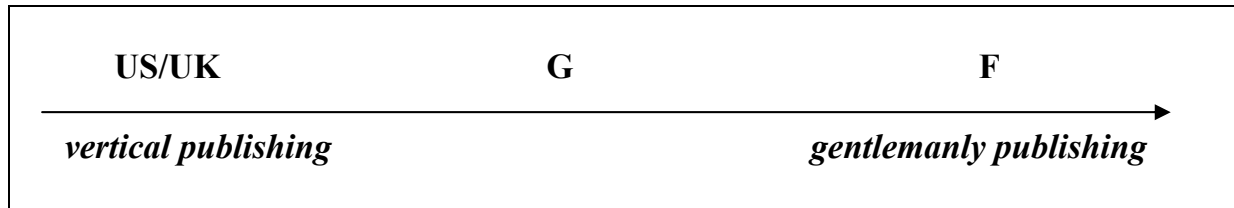
In the UK, the so-called system of “gentlemanly publishing” which dominated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries up to the late 1970s has changed to what is called “vertical publishing” or “conglomerate publishing” (Schiffrin). It is called vertical publishing because no longer are there many single publishing houses which compete with each other but rather, a very few conglomerates have bought up the formerly

¹ *Times Literary Supplement*; *London Review of Books* – two of the leading review journals published in the UK. Institutions such as The Poetry Society can be placed roughly on the same level of relatively high recognition and autonomy.

independent imprints which are now concentrated under one roof, to produce a vertical structure:

Publishing Group	Imprints Owned
BERTELSMANN	Arrow Books, Bantam, Bantam Press, Barrie & Jenkins, Black Swan, Bodley Head, Business Books, Jonathan Cape, Century, Chatto & Windus, Corgi, C W Daniel, Doubleday, Ebury Press, Eden Project, Everyman's Library, Expert Books, David Fickling, Fodor's, Harvill Press, Harvill Secker, Heinemann, Hogarth Press, Hutchinson, Pimlico, Random House, Red Fox, Rider, Sinclair Stevenson, Time Out, Transworld, Vermilion, Vintage, Yellow Jersey
BLOOMSBURY	Adlard Coles, Alphabooks, Ernest Benn, A&C Black, Bloomsbury, Bloomsbury Children's, Andrew Brodie, Peter Collin, EP Publishing, Christopher Helm, Herbert Press, Pica Press, Poyser, Thomas Reed, Whitaker's Almanack
PEARSON	Addison-Wesley, Adobe Press, Allen Lane, Allyn & Bacon, Benjamin Cummings, BradyGAMES, Cisco Systems, Dorling Kindersley, FT Prentice Hall, Funfax, Hamish Hamilton, Michael Joseph, Ladybird, Longman, Markt & Technik, Momentum, New Riders, Peachpit Press, Pears, Pearson Education, Penguin, Prentice Hall, Puffin, Que Publishing, Reuters, Rough Guides, Sams Publishing, Scott Foresman, Viking, Warne, York Notes, Ziff Davis
Source: Booksellers Association Reports Library February 2005, © 2005 The Booksellers Association	

This trend towards conglomerate publishing can also be observed in the US, in Germany and to a lesser extent in France. The French are still trying to hold onto their “exception culturelle”, but are finding it increasingly difficult to resist the lure of the conglomerates buying up the traditional houses (Schiffrin 11). On a scale from complete commercialisation on the one hand and complete independence on the other (if that ever existed), one can place the UK at one end of the spectrum, with Germany in the middle and France at the other end, although this position is becoming increasingly tenuous. This is what such a scale would look like:



What are the markers of this trend apart from the fact that conglomerates buy up imprints which subsequently are no longer independent? In terms of production, one noticeable change is the aim of large conglomerates like Bertelsmann or Holtzbrinck to increase profit margins. While so-called gentleman publishers were commercial businesses in that they also had to make ends meet and could not work as charities or subsidised businesses (Feather 129-224), it was always clear that book production is not as profitable as producing any other good such as food, clothing or cars. Today, by contrast, conglomerates are pushing profit margins up (from 1-3% to 12-15%) and therefore only publish books which allow them to reach this goal or at least to come near to it. Therefore, reference books, DVDs, Christmas bestsellers, thrillers, romance novels, cookery books and memoirs are published in great numbers, whereas poetry, short stories or unusual, experimental fiction and diversity in general have a hard time.

A second feature of this commercialised drive is the fact that even conglomerates have begun to merge: publishers have always bought each other up but the concentration process has increased enormously, therefore, even big publishing houses which owned several imprints have begun to be bought up (e.g. the Bertelsmann group bought Random House).

A third and highly remarkable trend is the increased spending and visibility of book marketing (cf. Squires 186ff.). Consequently, books, writers and publishers seem to be the new rock stars – books have become hip and some of the people involved in the industry have become celebrities and stars. Whereas an editor or publisher could say twenty years ago, “our authors write books, they don’t talk about them”, no author in their right minds can stay off the publicity tour. He or she has to attend book signings, will have to make appearances at the ever larger literary festivals throughout the UK,

will have to appear on radio and TV and will have to have a long portrait produced in the quality newspapers. Nowadays, British publishers invest enormous sums of money in marketing campaigns – and in paying very large advances to just a few writers. Because publishers rely so heavily on famous writers and on bestsellers, the so-called midlists have lost their importance, as have editors and the close working relationship which used to exist between writers and editors. Many of the editor's tasks are outsourced today, to make production leaner and cheaper, and the money is invested in promotional activities instead (see Squire and Robert McCrum's concise overview in *The Observer*).

In terms of distribution, two related major changes have affected the British literary field in the past decades. In contrast to France and Germany, Britain no longer has a fixed book price. In 1995, the reign of the so-called "Net Book Agreement" which regulated book prices, effectively ended because a group of publishers were no longer willing to adhere to it. The Net Book Agreement had been under threat before – in the early twentieth century when it was first invented, and during the 1960s when a court case debated whether the Net Book Agreement was conducive to cartels or not but it was found that this was not the case². Since the Net Book Agreement's disappearance, American-style chain-stores have changed the bookselling scene beyond recognition. Internet sales have increased and the current trend is towards supermarket book sales and an excessive discount culture. Almost no bookshop adheres to the so-called "recommended retail price" (RRP) and most follow the supermarkets and internet stores such as Amazon with massive discounts (50% off, 3 for the price of 2, etc.). The bi-annual price war over the latest Harry Potter-novel or the annual Christmas price slashing leave publishers with less profit, authors with fewer royalties, and ultimately, buyers and readers with less choice.

Is it all bad, then? No art in sight, only profit-making? From the recent figures concerning the state of health of the book market in the UK (and elsewhere), one can only gather that publishing trends in general are looking slightly more positive. Recent

² On its early history see Feather, for events since its demise see http://www.booksellers.org.uk/industry/display_report.asp?id=444, last visited 5 June 2006.

figures show that in the UK, the rise is most marked³. No country in the world publishes more books than the UK. About 80,000 books are published annually in Germany⁴, c. 170,000 in the US⁵, c. 20.000 in France (Schiffrin 10f.) and about 206,000 in the UK. But these figures do not tell us anything about the quality of the books, the trends of fiction and non-fiction or what future developments will be like. Looking behind the mere figures, which, by the way, are mostly easy to come by in the UK, but at close sight are often difficult to compare to their Continental or American counterparts and therefore lose their significance, looking behind the mere figures reveals a different tendency: resistance to commercialisation. Because the trend towards ever-more vertical publishing is so marked, and it is so particularly in the UK, oppositional developments are equally marked.

Resistance against commercialisation

The next section will therefore deal with these pockets of resistance and try to assess their wider cultural and social meaning. One can identify three such pockets and they pertain to all three phases of the life of a book. On the production side, writers are irrepressible. There are still authors who write books they know will not be bestsellers or not even reliable sellers. Poets will write poetry collections for an élite readership of 200, novelists will write experimental texts when most people want thrillers or romantic novels, and they will find publishers to produce these works. More and more independent publishers have sprung up in the UK, but interestingly also in Germany, which produce a tiny handful of high-quality special-interest books with little or no intention of becoming profitable. People invest their inheritance (e.g. Aviva books, Berlin) or what they earned from their former publishing houses, even from conglomerates (e.g. André Schiffrin, The New Press), in order to finally make those books they have always wanted to publish (see Hensel). There is even a special prize

³ 6.3% in the UK compared to only 0.9% in Germany, www.boersenverein.de/de/64626, last visited 5 June 2006.

⁴ 89,869 in 2005, www.boersenverein.de/64586, last visited 5 June 2006.

⁵ [Www.bowker.com/press/bowker/2006_0509_bowker.htm](http://www.bowker.com/press/bowker/2006_0509_bowker.htm), last visited 6 June 2006.

for independent publishers and the Independent Publishers Guild supports and represents anyone who has published more than three books and is not in fact merely an imprint of a larger conglomerate⁶.

On the part of distribution, a similar trend can be observed. In contrast to the ubiquitous chainstores such as W.H. Smith's or Waterstone's and Ottakar's, recently merged after a long legal wrangle, independent bookshops are getting their act together. When the *London Review of Books*, a veteran quality review and essay journal, opened up its independent bookshop near the British Museum in 2003, this was important enough to be commented on in the national press (*The Guardian* 8 May 2003). The London Review Bookshop only sells books at the recommended retail price, never gives discounts, organises readings and debates, and has proper booksellers working for them. The important and influential Guardian books pages on the internet list the nation's favourite independent bookshops and the British Book Awards also includes an award for the best independent bookseller.

Finally, on the part of reviewers, prize-judges and readers, a minority of those at the reception-end of the literary field also single out unusual, difficult or non-bestselling titles to review, award prizes to or discuss in their reading groups and on weblogs. Admittedly, buyers and readers seem to be most affected by commercialisation. With TV shows such as the Big Read on the BBC⁷, and the book club run by the afternoon-TV programme "The Richard and Judy Show" on Channel 4, the majority of reading groups, 50,000 (Hartley 2002) of which are estimated to exist in the UK, most people stick with certain classics such as Jane Austen, thrillers by Dan Brown and the like, cross-over titles such as Harry Potter, romance by Danielle Steele and Jilly Cooper or cookery books by Jamie Oliver. Even though sales increase for the winners of the Booker, Orange or Whitbread prizes, writers such as the recent gay Booker winner Alan Hollinghurst, Whitbread winner Ali Smith, who writes experimental novels and stories, or Carol Ann Duffy, winner of the TS Eliot prize for poetry, are only read and bought by a handful of people. Most literary prizes of which the UK has an

⁶ Publishers with fewer books can become non-voting members.

⁷ Copied as "Das große Lesen" on the German TV channel ZDF.

incomparable number in contrast to France and Germany, go to books and writers whose works are, if not best-selling material, at least realist, non-experimental fiction.

Summary

To sum up: on the whole, then, the lure of commercialisation is too great to resist for most players on the literary field. But the mere fact that pockets of resistance exist tells us something about the contested nature of this field. As much as the conglomerates are visible and drive the market, this does not mean that a complete victory of the profit-makers and bargain-drivers will characterise the future. The future may hold many more surprises which cannot be easily predicted from the current state of affairs. One will have to continue to hone one's tools of analysis in order to be able to account for extraordinary turns of events, e.g. the rise of non-fiction, the importance of independent bookshops or new reading trends such as weblogs, bookcrossing or reading groups which, although sparked off by commercial TV shows, move in unpredictable ways. The one reliable thing about the literary field is that it can still produce surprises – just as it did in the nineteenth century when commerce and culture were almost as closely linked as they seem to be today. One will therefore have to wait and see whether one of these days commercialisation will take a down-turn and diversity, interesting as well as challenging books, and readers who don't automatically follow the recommendations of TV shows or simply buy bestsellers will be on the rise once again.

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