Brief Reviews of Books and Products

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BRIEF REVIEWS OF BOOKS AND PRODUCTS

Thompson, J. B. (2021). ***Book wars: The digital revolution in publishing***. **Polity Press. pp. 511.**

Understandably, the advent of digital technologies has had a tremendous effect on the trade publishing industry. In a lengthy tome of over 500 pages, John B. Thompson not only outlines the effects of the transformation but expounds by connecting the various disparate elements of e-books, audiobooks, self-publishing, and retail. Practitioners and researchers of academic publishing specifically, and scholarly communications in general, could learn from the celebrations and failures in this complementary industry. *Book Wars: The Digital Revolution in Publishing* provides concrete research and data-driven examples from 2013 to 2019 that illustrate how radical (or not, in some cases) digital developments have been for the multifaceted Anglo-American publishing industry.

Thompson uses data obtained from a large trade publisher that has been anonymized and given the pseudonym "Olympic." These proprietary data focus on e-book sales from 2006 to 2016 and cover the initial boom and subsequent plateau of sales. Thompson uses charts and graphs as well as explication throughout the book to support his assertion that the fears of the e-book signifying the death of the analog book were largely unfounded (p. 53). The e-book provided an additional format with which to experience the same content, much like the audiobook, which is discussed in a later chapter. Similarly in higher education, digital textbooks and ancillary materials have seen an initial boom and plateau as publishers transition from physical textbooks to digital access codes. The chapters are structured mostly chronologically beginning with the initial dissemination of the e-book, through problems with the publisher's backlist, to the rise of self-publishing and crowdfunding to social media. Thompson accounts for overlapping ideas and technologies by grouping like subjects categorically.

Google and Amazon each have a dedicated chapter of approximately 20 and 30 pages, respectively. Google's revolutionary book project attempted to create a Library of Alexandria-esque repository by collaborating with publishers and libraries to digitize public domain as well as copyrighted material. Legal repercussions shut down the project, but the landscape had already been changed. For a full-length book on Google's project, see *Along Came Google: A History of Library Digitization* by Deanna Marcum and Roger Schonfeld. Amazon's game-changing story is woven throughout the remaining seven chapters and conclusion. As a retailer, Amazon accounts for the majority of book sales in the Anglo-American trade

publishing industry, especially in e-books. In addition, Amazon hosts one of the largest self-publishing platforms with their Kindle Direct service, allowing them to support both content creation and the direct dissemination of the content. This is something that trade publishers tend not to do, instead using booksellers as the intermediary between content and consumption. However, this is decidedly not a book strictly about Amazon and Google. Thompson deftly navigates the behemoths of the industry while introducing new players to publishing such as Inkshare, Unbound, and SmashWords, to name a few who tried and continue to try to reinvent the nature of the book.

Although *Book Wars* is not directly about scholarly communications or academic publishing, it offers a wealth of information on the ins and outs of trade book publishing. Many of the lessons could be adjusted to apply to issues related to the realm of scholarly publishing. For instance, Thompson discusses how many assumed that the trade publishing industry would follow a similar course as the music industry. With Napster, MP3s, and subsequent streaming music platforms, the traditional mode of listening to songs changed. Individual songs could be purchased or listened to in isolation from the rest of the album, which resulted in an unbundling of the album. Thompson explains that this shifted the mindset of the music consumer to one of "access becoming more important than possession" (p. 425). Accessing or listening to the digital music file became more important than owning or keeping it in a fixed, tangible format such as a cassette tape or CD-ROM. Books, on the other hand, cannot be easily unbundled in the same way as an album, so trade publishing sales did not reflect the music industry's evolution. In academic publishing, access to digital journal articles more closely resembles the music industry shift. Individual articles in one sense became more important than the journal in its entirety (like the album), and access to individual files became more important than possession.

Digital publishing also supported innovation in the very concept of the book. Thompson argues that apps such as "The Orchestra" and "The Elements" transformed how people interacted with content, although I would argue that these applications do not necessarily classify as a book. "The Elements" is based on the elements in the periodic table. Using incredible graphics, users can choose specific elements and digitally handle them while reading about them. Similarly, "The Orchestra" allows users to select a specific instrument and hear it in isolation and within the group. It breaks down the different components of a symphony and gives histories of instruments as well as composition. These apps, and others, have the capacity to support teaching and learning in interactive and innovative ways while maintaining the integrity of the research content that they are based on.

Thompson's exploration of interactive digital content is relevant to academia, where the use of open educational resources and open pedagogy have similarly shifted instruction. Faculty and

students are allowed and encouraged to legally adapt and create course materials in a way that encourages innovation and creativity. This has resulted in reimagining the textbook, with examples like *American Yawp* (Locke & Wright, 2019) and *The Open Anthology of Earlier American Literature* (DeRosa, 2015).

Different forms have different strengths, and while experimentation will no doubt continue, Thompson concludes that the print book is not going anywhere. He explains, "Technologies don't necessarily succeed one another sequentially but sometimes co-exist" (p. 473). The e-book has not negated the use of the print book. The publishing industries—both trade and scholarly—have adapted in a variety of ways to the demands of the digital revolution and illustrate that continued innovation is forthcoming.

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Rosie Liljenquist is the publishing and open access librarian at William & Mary. She earned her MSc in Information Management and Preservation from the University of Glasgow. She happily proclaims that she has worked in every library department, both public and academic, from IT to e-resources, special collections to scholarly communications. Her research interests include the efficacy of Open Educational Resources; the history of intellectual property, copyright, and fair use; library instruction; and fairy tales.