

UNLIKELY HEROES

If we reflect on the publishing landmarks of the early 21st century so far, we may first think of JK Rowling, Stephanie Meyer, Dan Brown and Stieg Larsson. The multi-million-selling epics of good and evil, love and loss, vampires and wizards, puzzles, detectives, hackers and criminals have been credited with turning an entire generation of teenagers (and quite a few adults) into avid readers, and with reviving a flagging fiction industry.

But when they write the history of publishing in the early 21st century, I wonder if it won't list heroes altogether more unlikely than Harry Potter and Bella Swan. For example, John Locke, insurance salesman from Louisville, Kentucky, who in 2011 became the first self-published author to clock up one million sales of digitally-downloaded books. Or Amanda Hocking, who signed a \$2m contract with St Martin's Press in March 2011, on the back of hundreds of thousands of e-book sales (teen vampire romance again) on Amazon's Kindle Store.

Locke and Hocking are unlikely new heroes of a revolution in publishing, which is taking place on several fronts. Not just the switch from ink on paper to 'e-ink', but the fragmentation and unpredictability which is coming from authors disintermediating traditional supply chains and finding smart ways to go more directly to market.

Even the textbook market is getting in on the action: according to social learning platform, Xplana, one in four college textbooks will be digital by 2015, with growth of between 80% and 100% over the next four years.

A 21st century publishing revolution? **John Peters** looks at the post-publication environment and its unlikely heroes



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2.7m

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Venerable bibliographic data provider, Bowker’s industry stats show that in 2004, just over 275,000 ‘regular’ books were published. A further 20,000 or so ‘non-traditional’ books (described as “reprints, often public domain, and other titles printed on-demand”) were published; less than 7% of the total output (Table 1 – overleaf).

By 2010, ‘traditional’ new titles published had grown to 316,000 – a steady 14% growth over the seven year period. But, in the same period, ‘non-traditional’ titles had exploded to a mind-boggling 2.7million; a 130-times increase, now comprising more than 90% of total new titles.

The world is certainly changing – and publishers are finding the changes challenging and unpredictable. Amazon announced in May 2011 that Kindle e-books are now out-selling paperback and hardback titles combined. Only a month before, the Bookseller’s Phillip Jones was quoted as saying “The most bullish predictions suggest that ebooks will account for 50 per cent of the US market by 2014 or 2015, and then will probably plateau.” The UK’s Yorkshire Post reported in August 2011 that “in January [2011] digital popular fiction comprised three per cent of consumer sales; by early summer they were six per cent, and they’ve now hit 10 per cent”.

Industry blog Novelr stated “no traditional publisher in the world... can offer Amanda Hocking terms that are better than what she’s currently getting, right now on the Kindle store, all on her own.”

Things are looking messy...

Locke, Hocking and other digital revolutionaries seem to have learned as much from Apple iTunes and the ‘user review’ approach of the App Store, Trip Advisor, etc as they have from the mainstream publishing industry. Both authors price their fiction at iTunes rates. If you buy a song for a dollar and you decide you don’t much care for it – not much is lost. It’s not a high-commitment purchase. So why not take that philosophy and apply it to a novel? And why not take the advice of a fellow reader – someone like you – rather than accept the word of a paid critic?

On his refreshingly irreverent website, Locke advises struggling authors to ignore publishers’ calls to “lower your expectations”, advising them instead to “raise them”. The subtext is not just to ignore publishers’ discouraging advice, but to ignore old-model publishers altogether.

My own field is the ultra-conservative one of scholarly research publishing. In this world the talk is of double-blind peer review, 95 per cent rejection rates, and arcane measures of citation half-life and ‘eigenfactors’. Here a year’s subscription to a handful of obscure papers published in a single journal can cost more than a small car; and a single article download can be \$40 or more.

Although scholarly publishing was quick to embrace online technology – searching through hundreds of thousands of published papers for something which matches a specialised research interest is a whole lot easier online – it has firmly resisted the messy, disintermediated, democratised philosophy of the digital era.

Technology-enabled innovations such as post-publication peer review, continuous online publishing, and utilisation of cloud technology and semantic search, creates a ‘lean’ scholarly publishing model, with lower costs. Those pursuing a lower-cost model should be able to offer fair prices and more pricing flexibility.

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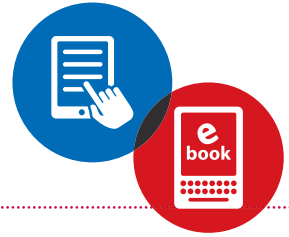


Table 1: Book industry statistics.

Source: Bowker

Date	New titles 'traditional'	New titles 'non-traditional'	Total
2010 (estimate)	316480	2776260	3092740
2009	302410	1033065	1335475
2008	289729	271851	561580
2007	284370	123276	407646
2006	274416	21936	296352
2005	251903	30597	282500
2004	275793	19730	295523





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When we formed GSE Research, a new-model scholarly publisher in 2011, we chose to locate firmly in this messy new world. It makes little sense for work which has been a year or two in the making to wait another year or two – or longer – to progress through peer review, revision, production, and the inevitable queue to be published in a future issue. But the change from a process which takes years, to one that takes weeks or days between submission and publication, needs a change in mindset, not just technology.

In our field of corporate governance, CSR, sustainability and environmental management, speed to market and inclusivity are important. A light-touch editor review, followed by post-publication peer review, comment and development, allows GSE to achieve this.

Widening participation in research publishing is another challenge, which must be met. We need to bring in ideas, working papers, case studies, teaching and learning methodologies and company-based material, as well as traditional scholarly research. We must lower barriers to entry for scholars from the developing world, practitioners with something to say, and less-experienced researchers.

Questions about quality control will, invariably, be raised. But as Dr Kamal Mahawar of the innovative medical publisher Webmed put it, “Why do people think that respectable professionals with good reputations would put their names to bad research, just because there is no peer review system in place to stop them doing so?”

To those from academia who feel locked into the game of tenure, rigour, four-star journals and citation counting, I say: play that game, if you must. Just don’t play it all the time. Spend 10% or 20% or 30% on a different game; on inclusivity, relevance, and getting ideas into circulation quickly and openly. That’s all it needs.

John Locke and Amanda Hocking will not displace JK Rowling and Stephanie Meyer. They offer alternatives. This isn’t a revolution which seeks to overthrow the old regime, but to work alongside it, offering choices, alternatives, and broader participation. In common with others such as the Social Science Research Network (SSRN) we fully expect some authors to develop ideas in GSE’s friendly post-publication environment, and to be published in traditional media elsewhere.

There is a freshening wind blowing through traditional research publishing and it is blowing towards the future. Protests about passing fads, lowering of quality standards and the need to preserve a system which has served us well for several hundred years, won’t make the tide turn back or the wind stop blowing.

There has been much talk through 2011 of revolution – the ‘Arab Spring’ and the battles for self-determination and freedom of expression in Egypt, Libya, Syria and elsewhere. Revolutions typically come with weapons and bloodshed. The revolution in our industry is of a different sort, where the weapons are words, ideas, websites, e-books and Kindles.

We need to understand this revolution, and create some new rules; of choice, inclusivity, fair dealing, author engagement and open-mindedness. Publishers need to embrace the ideas that underpin the revolution and move forwards through the next decades.

The unlikely heroes of the publishing revolution around us in the early 21st century are playing a significant part in history. We at GSE Research are pleased to be part of the revolution; embracing the brave new world of democratised and globalised scholarly endeavour. **gf**



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Peters is CEO of GSE Research; online publisher of scholarly research and business information in the areas of Governance, Sustainability and Environmental Management. GSE is working with likeminded partners including Pub2Web (semantic web technology hosts); OKS (digital production and workflow); Institute of Directors India; Social Science Research Network (SSRN); EABIS, the Academy of Business in Society; and EFMD; to embrace the challenges of sustainability, governance and the digital information revolution.



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