



Creative Users, Social Networking, and New Models of Publishing

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the changing landscape of the publishing industry, which is being reshaped by dynamics of user co-creation, social networking and open licencing. It briefly touches on possible research themes associated with disruptive changes in the world's oldest media/creative industry, particularly under the umbrella of "Cultural Science". Two new models of publishing are discussed: literary self-publishing in China and open innovations in academic publishing. It argues that evolution in the publishing industry goes beyond "digital publishing" towards "new publishing in a digital world", demanding new models serving population-wide creativity and open knowledge communication.

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Traditional concepts of publishing are being disrupted by open and networked digital technologies. Relationships between authors, readers, publishers and content are being turned on their head. What we thought we knew about publishing is being challenged. And new ways of conceptualising 'value' and 'value creation' are being demanded.

What does this disruption as well as transformation of the publishing industry mean for publishing studies, cultural studies, and research on media and creative industries? And in particular, how does research on digital publishing fit into the Cultural Science agenda? What might the insights of university-based researchers be able to offer the world's oldest media industry as it struggles to deal with an uncertain future?

This short paper reviews disruptive changes being driven by creative users and social networking and considers their impact on the traditional publishing industry. It briefly touches on research on new models of publishing that is being developed within the wider Cultural Science project. It focuses, in particular, on two case studies being explored within the new models in publishing theme: literary self-publishing in China and open innovations in academic publishing.

The Disruption of Traditional Publishing

User generated content and social networking are challenging our conceptions of what it is to be a "reader" and what it means to be an "author". "Readers" are no longer (if they ever were) passive consumers of knowledge. Rather, the publishing industry is being forced to engage with readers that are active, creative, and connected by digital social networks. Unlike offline social networks that existed as early as human being, Internet and social media now connect people with common interests all over the world and beyond physical and geographical limitations. As such, readers can share, interact, and collaborate anywhere, anytime, and with anyone they like. New technologies mean that everyone can now create and publish their work online. More than that, everything is being published. Users are engaging with one another in digital spaces through acts of creating and publishing content. In addition to the increasingly significant international phenomenon of literary self-publishing, even within a relatively narrow sphere, like scholarly communication, blogging, self-archiving, pre-prints and informal academic networks are changing the face of academic publishing (Waldrop 2008).

Everyone had become both a distributor and a gatekeeper. Amazon's Goodreads is a type of "social network market" (Potts, Cunningham et al. 2008) for published content, allowing readers to collectively select and socially recommend the best titles; social reference management sites like Mendeley could be understood as a counterpart in academic publishing. Emerging digital curation tools like Scoop are further empowering readers and transforming them into editors.

The boundaries between content creators and consumers and the distinction between professionals and amateurs are increasingly blurred (Mandiberg 2012). Two crucial values added by traditional publishing are being disrupted: the traditional gatekeeping function of publishing firms is being replaced by the collective intelligence of readers; and publishing industry intermediaries are being replaced by direct interaction between content creators and consumers.

Copyright industries are evolving to cope with increasingly open creation and distribution systems. Free content is being enabled through licensing frameworks like Creative Commons, and through new approaches to the monetisation of content. Freemium models and cross-subsidisation are taking on a much more prominent role in the creative economy. These models are making free content both legal and sustainable.

Many traditional publishers regard these disruptive changes as a crisis and have adopted defensive strategies, attempting to lock down content and restrict free access. However, I would argue that what we are seeing is a process of creative destruction. The innovations of digital publishing players like Amazon, iBooks, Lulu, Plos, PeerJ and other digital initiatives are making the publishing business more efficient, transparent, productive and innovative. They are making the publishing world a better one. Publishers are being presented with both a "crisis" they have seen and "opportunities" they might not see. There is little choice but to evolve in order to survive.

New Research Themes on New Publishing

All of this places new models of publishing at the epicentre of the most important developments in landscapes of media and communication. Perhaps the first question we should ask is what the new value propositions of publishing industry business models might be? Population wide creativity and the democratisation of technologies for mass communication mean that content is no longer scarce. As a result, there is shift from markets in content to markets in services that either make content useful or which make processes of cultural creation more productive and efficient. Selling information and service along with or about content is becoming more profitable than selling the content itself.

Demand for new kinds of services is being created accordingly. For example, in scholarly publishing, content overlay and data-mining tools are becoming big business for publishers. Instead of seeking out talent and selecting manuscripts for readers, many literary agencies and publishers are providing editing and marketing services to self-published authors.² For publishers servicing the gold open access market and vanity publishers, customers are no longer readers, but authors. What does this shift mean for what it is to be a ‘publisher’? Do we still need “traditional” publishers at all? And if we do, what is it that publishers offer that is valuable?

The next theme is related, but not identical, asking what conditions might be needed in order to foster sustainable, productive publishing ecologies in the context of open and networked digital technologies? The overall publishing system is moving from closed to open. The term “open” here not only refers to the openness of content access, but also the democratization of creating, sharing, and assessing content in the publishing industry. Will these open systems be more efficient than their closed predecessors in terms of the growth of knowledge and economic benefit? How will a sustainable, productive, and high-quality open system be established? Further, to what extent could the models of open publishing innovation be applied to other forms of content at scale?

This theme also includes looking closely at the changing role of coordinating institutions and infrastructure – and the kinds of institutions most likely to foster and sustain positive social and cultural impacts associated with publishing in the digital age.

Finally, this program of research considers the shift from national to global content landscapes. Digitally enabled global communities are emerging not only for publishing but for all creative industries. So to what extent are national systems for organizing publishing industries being superseded by globalization? How can cultural diversity and national identity be maintained in the context of global flows of content and culture? This is not only an issue of non-English-speaking countries facing the increasingly dominant role of English in mediating knowledge, but also a concern of countries like Australia, which have small populations and where creative producers struggle to find a foothold in competitive global markets.

Case Study: Online Literature and Self-Publishing in China

The Chinese online literature industry (also known as literary self-publishing or web romance) involves over a million authors and 247 million readers accounting for 44% of China’s internet users (CNNIC 2014). The vast scale of population-wide literary creativity has been commercialised and industrialised with an estimated market worth 4.63 billion RMB, roughly \$650 million US dollars (Song 2014). Chinese online literature sites have

² See Lucy Montgomery and Frances Pinter, ‘Data Innovation and Open Access’, *Big Innovation Center Blog*: <http://www.biginnovationcentre.com/Blog/423/Data-Innovation-and-Open-Access>

developed viable Freemium plus micro-payment models to monetize born digital user-generated-content, allowing readers to try before they buy and pay on a chapter-by-chapter basis. Bundling and cross-subsidisation are increasingly popular business models as well. For example, the China Mobile Reading Base operated by China Mobile combines online literature with 3G mobile internet data and other information services. Based on over 500 million mobile Internet users and the monopoly of China Mobile, the bundles made 3.5 billion RMB revenue in 2013 (Ye 2014), in which online literature is the major source of content.

The democratization of literary publishing has changed the lives of many self-published grassroots authors. For example, Tangjia Sanshao started writing online literature at twenty-three when he did not have a stable job. From 2012 to 2013, he earned an annual royalty of 26.5 million RMB (about AU \$4.6 million)³. It is reported that by 2014 Wang Puning, a casual worker with only high school education and a monthly income of less than 1,200 RMB (roughly AU \$200), has made over 600, 000 RMB royalties (about AU \$ 100, 000) from his 6 bestselling titles⁴.

Rampant piracy is an important factor in shaping emerging online literature business models in China. Revenue strategies associated with China's born digital content suggest a co-evolution between systems that depend on copyright, and pirate markets. Chinese copyright owners are employing increasingly proactive strategies to fight against piracy and Chinese writers have won copyright lawsuits against Internet giants like Baidu and Apple⁵. Meanwhile, Chinese digital publishers are being faced with what is perhaps the world's most open system for monetizing content. They are reconsidering the dynamics of large-scale unauthorized distribution and how it might be harnessed to develop viable business models. The commercial success of the heavily pirated online novel "Startled by Each Step" is an interesting example of this challenge, and commercial opportunity. Startled by Each Step was widely circulated via unauthorised distribution (pirate) networks; Its wide dissemination allowed the series to gather a very large number of fans and played a key role in the growth of its popularity. This strong fan following in turn helped to ensure that the TV adaptation of the story was a hit. The print version of the story also became a super bestseller (Ren and Montgomery 2012).

There are inherent tensions between the highly dynamic, decentralised structure of literary self-publishing in China and the government control and censorship that have been hallmarks of China's media system under the Chinese Communist Party. It is

³ <http://www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/ID/831534/Fantasy-rules-rich-writers-list.aspx>

⁴ http://news.timedg.com/2014-04/09/content_14565189.htm

⁵ See two English articles at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-09/18/content_15766624.htm

And <http://www.chinesebookstore.com/chinese-authors-sue-apple/>

important to ask to what extent self-publishing is disrupting China's government-controlled and censored literary publishing system. On the one hand, the rise of online literature has challenged the established, regulated traditional print counterpart of literary publishing. The print literary publishing industry was declining in the 1990s as it failed to satisfy the growing social demands of entertaining literary content. Self-published genre fiction filled a major gap in the market, resulting in a booming, and massively popular, online literature industry. It thus became harder for the Chinese government to control self-published content using traditional censorship strategies, and to regulate decentralized population-wide creativity effectively. On the other hand, online literature and self-publishing do not exist in a vacuum, but a complex social and economic system in China where the government maintains a high level of control over funding and commercial opportunities. This has produced a system of self-censorship for online literature. Authors and online literature sites are conscious of government views on acceptable content. The government ensures that both groups remain mindful of the bottom line through targeted action and campaigns against those who violate content guidelines. For example, in April 2014 the government's "Cleaning up the Web" campaign closed over 20 online literature websites⁶.

Online literature is a snapshot of the booming digital publishing industry in China. China has a huge market for digital publishing. Its eBook market is estimated as 2/3 of the size of the American market, which is currently the world's largest (Kozlowski and Greenfield 2014). With 538 million Internet users, huge creative population is also a significant bonus for open and networked publishing innovations, harnessing user co-creation and social networking. On the other hand, China still has the world's tightest governmental control and censorship over digital publishing. The monopoly of state-owned publishing corporations and the resistance from those old conservative models are barriers against digital publishing evolution. Weak copyright enforcement and threats of rampant piracy make the profitability of digital publishing uncertain. Chinese digital publishing provides a unique and valuable area to understand the new value propositions of publishers in a rapidly evolving market, the national approaches to Chinese language digital publishing, and the regulatory structure to balance governmental intervention, corporative governance, and public interests in the evolution of publishing industry.

Case Study: Open Access Innovations in Scholarly Publishing

Driven by open and networked digital technologies, publishing transformations are happening in institutional markets as well. According to Scanlon (2013), scholarly publishing today "may be subject to change in two ways, due to the impact of open access publishing and the prominence of Web 2.0 technologies and social media". Open access

⁶ See an article in Chinese at <http://www.nanzao.com/sc/china/25010/nei-di-qi-dong-jing-wang-2014xing-dong-shi-yu-wen-xue-wang-zhan-bei-feng>

and networked innovation in scholarly publishing is an important research opportunity to understand disruptive changes impacting on publishing in institutional contexts.

Unlike ‘trade fiction’ markets (such as literary self-publishing), authors and readers in academic publishing are career-minded, rather than self-expression-motivated. Their concerns are not only communication of knowledge, but more importantly, the certification and credentialing of their publications. My PhD research looked at a series of open and networked models in scholarly publishing including online preprints, scholars’ self-archiving initiatives, social/open peer review, and social reference management⁷. In particular, my research examined how these initiatives develop as viable open innovations in institutional contexts, balancing the tension between certification and communication. A typical example is a Chinese open access initiative called “Science Paper Online”, which employs “publish first, formal peer review later” model to enable instant and efficient knowledge exchange as well as social collaboration. This platform has published over 75,000 original online papers to date.⁸ Supervised by the Chinese National Ministry of Education, Science Paper Online is inspiring in terms of combining the dynamics of open and networked innovations with institutional authorities to make open models for communication and certification of scholarship viable in practices.

Action research is increasingly important in the areas of open access and academic publishing transformation. Instead of observing the practices as a bystander, researchers can actively improve practices (Griffiths, 1998: 21) by using their expertise to encourage positive change. Action research involves a cyclic process in which research, action and evaluation are interlinked, and in which those involved are participants in the change process (Hart & Bond, 1995: 37-38). Knowledge Unlatched is an inspiring example of a global scale action research experiment in open access publishing. It aims to build an international library consortium to collectively share the costs of open access and make scholarly content freely accessible. KU has signed up close to 300 libraries from 24 countries in the pilot project,⁹ which lays a solid foundation for the sustainability of the initiative. Based on an institutional crowdfunding model, KU demonstrates that in some cases it is becoming more efficient to develop globally coordinated systems for sharing the costs of OA publishing than it is to attempt to keep content closed in the academic publishing world. This initiative is being co-developed by non-profit institutions, universities, and libraries. University-based researchers are playing an essential role.¹⁰ It

⁷ My PhD thesis “Open and networked initiatives and the digital transformation of academic publishing in China” has just won 2013 QUT Outstanding Doctoral Thesis award. The full text version can be downloaded here: <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/63337/>

⁸ <http://www.paper.edu.cn/>

⁹ <http://www.knowledgeunlatched.org/press-release/>

¹⁰ CCI researcher Dr Lucy Montgomery is the deputy director of Knowledge Unlatched.

aims to develop a critical research program alongside its practical activities, through projects like the KU Big Knowledge Lab.

Methodologically the combination between critical inquiry and bibliometrics analysis will be important in humanities research on academic publishing, particularly under the umbrella of Cultural Science. Critical and data-driven research will be valuable for informing stakeholders and policy makers on the profound transformations of academic publishing and policy changes accordingly. Data-rich initiatives in open access publishing such as PloS, Mendeley, Altmetrics deserve more attention from humanities researchers.

Research and practices of open scholarship are moving fast and going beyond narrow concepts of “publishing”. Interactive, participative, and collaborative open publishing systems are not only a medium for publication or an open source of scholarship, but “an integral part of collaborative learning, open education, and open science” (Ren, 2013). A knowledge ecosystem characterised by “the co-production of knowledge goods and services” (Peters, 2010) among academic authors and readers, publishers, and the general public is emerging, driven by open and networked dynamics. Nevertheless, some key issues remain unsolved (Harley and Acord 2011, Ren 2013, Stewart, Procter et al. 2013). How can academic rigor be achieved by crowdsourcing, social networking, and autonomous user creativity instead of institutionalised quality control and publisher-mediated certification? Emerging initiatives like open peer review and alternative metrics remain in their infancy and require more work to transform them into acceptable and practical models. Under such an institutional context, the co-evolution between digital technologies, business innovations, and policies is essential for the future of academic publishing. Research is a bridge connecting these aspects.

Conclusion

Publishing studies needs to co-evolve with the digital transformation of the publishing industry. Employing new theoretical approaches like Cultural Science is useful, but not enough. University-based researchers need closer connections with, and deeper involvement in, processes of publishing evolution. I keep my connections with front line digital publishers in China after I left publishing industry for an academic career. Over 20 publications in China’s leading journals and press media and a few popular columns in digital publishing portals are derived from our communication. The exchange of insightful ideas between researchers and practitioners is inspiring for both sides with regard to publishing evolution. On the other hand, publishers and publishing researchers need a broader vision beyond the traditional territory of “publishing”. The future of publishing is not “digitised traditional publishing” or simply “digital publishing”, but “new publishing in a digital world”, which means a wide variety of publishing models serving population-wide creativity and open knowledge communication.

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