

The Book as a Dynamic System for the Commodification of Ideas and Cultural Expressions

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Today, the book is challenged by the Internet as a source of information, and by other media as a vehicle for national culture, and yet it retains its privileged place as a valued and venerated vehicle for literary culture. Through an exploration of contemporary changes in publishing set against a historical understanding of the conceptual origins of copyright, I propose a redefinition of the book. I argue that the book is a dynamic system for the commodification of ideas and cultural expressions. As a system rather than a material object the book packages, stores, verifies, gatekeeps, permits trade by allowing transference of ownership, and verifies by documenting previous ownership of texts on which its ideas are built. Through this system creative, artistic, innovative, and cutting edge scientific ideas reach an audience. This is where its economic value and cultural worth lies.

Keywords: book system / publishing industry / economic capital / cultural capital / copyright / e-book / e-publishing

The book and the economy of cultural spaces

How can we assess the value of the book? What is its worth in the economy of cultural production? Today, the book is challenged by the Internet as a source of information, and by other media as a vehicle for national culture. And yet it retains its privileged place as a valued and venerated vehicle for literary culture. The book has been seen as a vessel that holds and preserves our literary culture and enables us to transport it over distance and time.

This is a view shared and celebrated by UNESCO through their annual designation of a World Book Capital. Books—or rather the literature they contain—have a humanitarian role when they contribute to international understanding and cultural diversity. As the Director General of UNESCO Mrs Irina Bokova said for World Book and Copyright Day 2011:

Books are works of art and science, and vehicles for ideas. They magnificently materialize creative diversity, generate universal knowledge and contribute to intercultural dialogue. They are instruments for peace. (Bokova)

Such inspiring sentiments show how highly literary culture is valued (see Larrea and Weedon). In order to preserve it UNESCO has worked with the International Publishers Association to raise awareness of copyright,¹ and this year launched the World Antipiracy Observatory, which details national initiatives and policies to combat piracy. Combating piracy, they argue, preserves creativity.

Yet the issues about intellectual property and the economic exploitation of that property are far from straightforward. On the one hand, the book contains the creative ideas of the author and expressions of those ideas by the author, designer, and illustrator. On the other hand, the book is a technology from moveable type to the iron press, and from the printing machine to the e-book. So why, in competitive media marketplace, where cinema competes with television and the radio with the iPod, should the book have a privileged place?

To answer this question we need to unpack the notions of value embedded through history in society's conceptualization of the book.

If we reduce the book to the level of a mere object of trade bought and sold according to market demand, we gain a level of abstraction that sheds light on the transformation of a product of the laboring mind into a commodity. The labor invested in a book by the author and publisher is largely intellectual labor plus the costs of manufacture and distribution. It has an exchange value, which varies according to the demands of the market, the books' availability or scarcity, and the amount of spending money within the economy after basic needs are met. N. N. Feltes² puts this in Marxist terms, which might be useful to our analysis.

Marxist notions of value

Use value

The book has a use value—the value of one service or commodity in exchange for another. The great eighteenth century encyclopedias became standard reference sources in the cultures of their origin and inaugurated a host of other publications often published in parts but aiming to communicate “universal knowledge.” They had a use value as the definitive source of knowledge at the time. These were great cultural artifacts of national benefit and objects of prestige. Use value, however is independent

of cultural prestige, as we can see in the use value of the more parochial *The Good Housekeeping Cookery Book* or *The Michelin Map of Europe* to the householder or traveler respectively.

Exchange value

The map, however, is a good example of how use value can rise or decline as its use changes. Encyclopedias and maps, even cookery books, become outdated, the information within them loses its usefulness for its original purpose or else, in the case of the map, it is displaced onto a new media form—a GPS device in this instance. Sometimes the work regains its use value as a new purpose is found: old maps can be used as resources for local historians or genealogists, or framed as pictures for the wall. Of course, the work's exchange value—what it can be exchanged for—will also change as the use value declines. And its price may rise as the book becomes rare or valued as a collector's item.

Conceptually, then, we can see four overlapping values in the book: an intrinsic value, a use value, an exchange value, and a price. Like an Escher staircase each appears related to the next in an eternally upward (or downward) spiral. The illusion of a linked progression from one to another is an illusion that must be interrogated because the systems that give a value to each do overlap, but we need to look closely to see the limits of the links between them.

Economic factors in the notion of value in the book trade

The history of the book tells us that there are four essential factors that determine the economics of the book trade: the value of the book as literary property, the cost of its manufacture, regulatory and institutional controls of the book trade, and the price of the book in the market. We can relate these to our conceptual notions of value, though, again, there is no direct relationship between the concept and the economic factor. Even the closest and apparently most obvious connection—the connection between prices—is muddied by contractual arrangements both within and outside the industry. The price in the market should not be taken as Marx's monetary price—the 2010 price war between e-book sellers and publishers showed that retail prices are not set by a Marxist formula of supply and demand. It harked back to the British net book agreement from 1900, when all publishers agreed to sell their books only to booksell-

ers who charged the “net” book price they set to preserve profit margins within the trade.³ However, this can only be sustained by a highly institutionalized trade and where competition laws allow it.

Redefinition of the book as an immaterial object and an electronic format

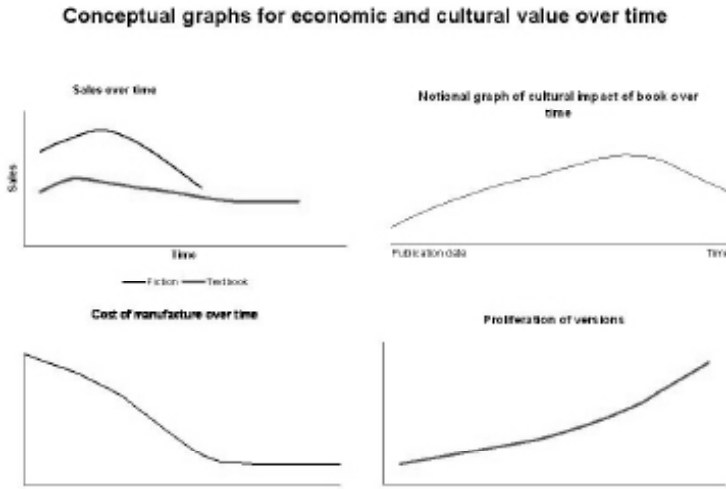
We are hence witnessing a redefinition of the book as an immaterial object and an electronic format. The e-book is as much a vehicle of ideas as the paperback. And today, the book trade is dealing not with the death of the book, but with the commodification of the digital book.

A potent force in the economic value of books, and part of our cultural heritage, are the collections of books accumulated by individuals and national institutions. This is also a significant factor in the commodification of books, as publishers package them in selections publishing them in uniformly bound series or in libraries. With immaterial book the digital archive forms a virtual bookshelf and must exhibit the same traceable provenance and security of ownership. In the virtual bookshelf we may have a family photo album alongside a book collection and this digital archive may include other valued collections including films and games (see the studies in Matthews and Moody).

Yet, of course, the physical nature of a book is part of its attraction, as we remember the size of atlases, the color and drawing of illustrations in it, etc. The selection of a few books for our physical bookshelf thus becomes more significant and the immaterial book raises our appreciation of the physical item. So in a post-industrial era we must separate the cost of industrial manufacture from our estimation of the price of the book. Today, miniaturization and portability add value, and an e-book that is securely archived, has our stamp of ownership, and has a verifiable provenance may well sell for more than its physical counterpart.

If we compare notional graphs of economic and cultural value over time, we can see how these two fields interrelate. While the sales of a title decline over time, if the book achieves recognition its cultural impact will rise over time. And while the initial cost of production of a work is high, since the author, publisher, and editor invest time and capital in its manufacture, if it achieves success—literary and popular—there will be increasing demands of more and various versions of the text.

Figure



The relationship of economic and cultural value

We have seen that the book cannot be defined as a material object—a codex, a scroll, on parchment, or paper. But the old metaphors—the notion of the book as a hinge, a crystal goblet, a rose—say a great deal about how we value the book as an aesthetic object and relate directly to its cultural significance in our society.⁴

However, I would like to redefine the book more prosaically, namely as a system for the commodification of ideas and cultural expressions. Through this system creative, artistic, innovative, and cutting edge scientific ideas reach an audience. This is where its economic value lies. As a system for commodification the book packages, stores, verifies, gatekeeps, permits trade by allowing transference of ownership, and verifies by documenting previous ownership of texts on which its ideas are built. Through history, the book has been challenged in all these facets.⁵

The broad and specific effects of globalization on creative property and the future of the book in a multimedia marketplace

The book system has had to deal with the changes in cultural production brought by the information technologies and globalization. Digitalization has liberated the text through new typographical design and new delivery technologies; it has altered workflows for internal and external gatekeepers and required revisions of the processes of ownership transference within the industry.

Significantly, one of the effects of digitalization and globalization is that questions about freedom of ideas have again surfaced. Let us look back now through the haze of events in the first decade of the twenty-first century—the burst of the dot.com bubble, Google’s books online, and the microeconomics of digital delivery to niche markets. These events can obscure longer trends, and the roots of changes lie in earlier developments: The history of the book shows a shifting of the balance between access to ideas, which led to intellectual and social development, and restrictions such as licensing, control through taxes, censorship, and entry costs, which limit access. In the past, resistance to institutional and regulatory control from authoritarian regimes that have imposed forms of trade control and censorship has created its own cultural spaces. In the 1990s, concerns about the concentration of media ownership and its effect on cultural diversity were cited in the debates over the growing power of media conglomerates. Yet popularly this debate has found relief with the opportunities available through self-publishing on the Internet.

The expansion of Western notions of copyright

If we look back four centuries, we can see an expansion of Western notions of intellectual property and copyright. Early notions of ownership were the grants given by the King to his favorite subjects to print and sell copies of almanacs or the Bible. Each of these grants or patents brought in considerable income to the owner, and after 1603 were formalized as the English Stock. The ownership of the stock was then sold to shareholders within the trade. A large proportion of these shareholders were booksellers and paper merchants who had the capital to invest. In early seventeenth century, shareholders had a comfortable annual dividend of around 12.5%. This was an agreement to trade in the manufacture of these commodities and there was no reason why it should not be in perpetuity. However, as new genres were developed the question of setting a time limit on trade in them arose.⁶

The long term effect of this arrangement was to separate the printing and publishing functions of book production—which was crucial to the parallel separate development of the printing factory and publishing house in the nineteenth-century Britain, where manufacturing took place in the printing factory and the business model was one of capital investment in industrial processes plus the publisher who was able to trade in the intellectual property of the author. Over time revenue from book sales gradually went up the production chain from the bookseller through publisher to the writer leading to a professionalization of authorship. Royalty contracts emerging in the nineteenth century show a new understanding of the income stream arising from shared intellectual labor.

Throughout the history of the book, the book system for the commodification of ideas has revolved around refining the notion of copyright. This had little to do with authorship, at least in its first formulation under Queen Anne. This first law sought to protect the interests of the producers, however later formulations of copyright, after the dismissal of perpetual copyright, protected the author's creative property for lengthening periods of time, most recently extended across Europe to 70 years after the author's death. The original formulation of the right to copy the original has come to protect the creative work of each individual within the cultural product. It is not the idea that is protected, but the expression of that idea by the writer, illustrator, typographer, and, as intellectual property rights have extended, the filmmaker, actor, voice artist, etc.

It is a point of philosophical debate as to the origins of ideas: we are familiar with Renaissance notions of personalizing creation, signing works of art, and with the Romantic notions of authorship, the *auteur*. They have given us the notion of individual creative expression. Such a view excludes from the exchange value for the author's work the author's creative influences within her or his social group, education, cultural milieu, and also what we might call the media ecology in which author can thrive. Copyright simply provides a financial mechanism to reward the author's labor, with only a passing nod to the public domain once s/he has been rewarded. Financial reward may or may not reflect the intrinsic value of the author's work, although there is some correlation between the author's experience and knowledge of market needs and her or his ability to sell more, between her or his talent and the market's willingness to pay a premium for quality, between her or his ideas and the readers' willingness to pay more for these ideas.

With the advent of the media marketplace in the early twentieth century, as film and radio came to share the properties of the printed story and the play, the business of negotiating, dividing, and selling subsidiary rights

gave rise to literary agencies. These early business practices heralded multi-media contracts that authors receive today. The notion of a single right to make copies has become that of a group of rights, or as it was said by the mid-nineties, “a stable of properties” that would include the intellectual property rights to print, animate, film and audio adaptations, conventions, events, merchandising, etc.⁷ The storytellers’ intellectual property and the development of that property within the media marketplace substantively contribute to the country’s economy as well it as its cultural life.

The exchange value is of course subject to the local media ecology and the wider marketplace, which increasingly crosses national boundaries. Scandinavian countries have benefited from the Internet market with recent international successes in the main fiction charts. Fiction however sells within a known price range in an English language market. More variable is the journal market, and when territorial and media boundaries are eroded by the global multimedia marketplace, journal publishers set different levels of tariff to purchase access to their publications—an area that is closely watched by UNESCO who seek to improve access for so-called Third World countries. Institutional and regulatory constraints can also be imposed to encourage (typically) national cultural identity with stories set in the country or region written in its language.

The book system for the commodification of ideas extends beyond copyright. Scientific and technological inventions are covered by patents, and patents are a way of defining the ownership of a “useful” innovation. Patents require non-obvious “step” invention, which is defined in the US as having “utility,” while in Europe, where the distinction between material and immaterial invention has proven intransigent, the patented device must have “a technical effect.”⁸ Business methods patents allow for the patenting of e-businesses including Amazon’s online bookselling. Amazon patented a method and system of placing a purchase order via a communications network (patent US n° 5.960.411) and methods and systems of assisting users in purchasing items (n° 6.865.546). Commodification permits the development of restrictive commercial business technologies.

Conclusion: ownership of ideas versus access

In conclusion, while McLuhanites might argue that book publishing fixed the idea and the word in a locked typographical format, to be freed only by electronic media, others might argue that the book, by locating the idea at a co-ordinate within the text, allowed for debate, discussion, and its refinement and development.

Innovation and creation arise from the interchange and building up of ideas, and much of this is carried out through the book system. Authors have historically sometimes sought audiences at the expense of financial reward: there is a balance between communicating ideas to wide audiences by opening up access, and gaining compensation for the intellectual labor that went into the expression of those ideas. Publishers have also sought to drive up audiences by distributing the authors' and their work for free, i.e. by opening up access to their full text journal databases, publishing free samples or chapters, etc. Developing audiences is a part of the publisher's role that has been so often ignored. The ascent of the author and the notion of a worldwide market place accessible through the Internet have obscured the significant work of the publisher in creating and stimulating demand through their selection processes, lists, genre definitions, and close contact with the interests of the readers in their sector. Publishers balance audience building with financial return through such techniques as distributing the first volume in a series at a discounted rate or, in the days of silent films, by adding clauses to their contracts with authors claiming a financial return for their role in developing the audience for the movie.

The book trade has changed historically and continues to do so, yet it has retained the functions of gatekeeping, verifying, and recording ideas. However, the book today is not just a material object—a repository. We have to redefine the book in terms of its processes. It is a dynamic system for the commodification of ideas and cultural expressions, and through this system cultural, artistic, innovative, and cutting edge creative ideas reach an audience.

NOTES

¹ See also Philip Altbach and Caroline Davis's work on book trade in Africa and Sarah Brouillette on postcolonial writing in the marketplace.

² See the introductory chapters to his *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* (Feltes). He puts Victorian literature in a Marxist context of cultural production.

³ For a history of the net book agreement and its context, see Morgan et al.

⁴ I am referring to Beatrice Warde's famous essay "The Crystal Goblet" (see Warde) and the Catalonian tradition of giving a rose with every book sold on St George's Day, a symbol that has been taken up by UNESCO on its World Book and Copyright day (http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=5125&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).

⁵ And of course by different cultures globally. See Robert Murray Davis on literature in Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania (see Davis), as well as older studies such as George Parker's *The Beginnings of Book Trade in Canada* (see Parker).

⁶ See Morgan et al. Eric De Bellaigue also gives a insider's view of the issues in the twentieth century.

⁷ There are many articles and books today about the financing of digital books, adaptation, and e-book apps. See, e.g., Murray; Mussinelli; Young; and Stockmann.

⁸ Treated differently by US Patent Office, European PO, and Japanese PO. Software protection by EPO is opposed to the original article 52 of the European Patent Convention. See also Toynbee on authors and copyright.

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Knjiga kot dinamičen sistem za komodifikacijo idej in kulturnih praks

Ključne besede: knjižni sistem / založništvo / ekonomski kapital / kulturni kapital / avtorske pravice / e-knjiga / elektronsko založništvo

Kulturni status knjige kot estetske forme in kot medija, ki izmenjuje ideje, je v devetnajstem in dvajsetem stoletju postajal ogrožen, kot ni bil nikoli dotlej. Trdnjavo knjige je oblegala velika množica družbenih in političnih sprememb, zamajalo jo je topništvo različnih množičnih medijev, izzvale pa so jo prav digitalne tehnologije, ki so jo osvobajale njenega fizičnega utelešenja v tiskarskem črnilu na papirju. V devetnajstem stoletju je tovarniška proizvodnja zaznamovala izdelavo knjig in procesi dela stavcev, mehanskega tiska, preloma in vezave so ustvarjali trdo vezana in broširana dela, ki so jih potem v škatlah razpošiljali z ladjami, železnico ali po kopnem po trgovskih poteh imperija. Sam proces izdelave je iz knjige naredil prvi množični medij. Postavljala so se vprašanja o vrednosti knjige v dobi mehanske reprodukcije. Ali je cenenost tiska devalvirala njeno vsebino? Ali naj bo davek na literarno produkcijo? Kakšen status je imela knjiga, ko je postala dostopna vsakemu bralcu? Kaj so sprejemljive meje svobode tiska?

V dvajsetem stoletju je knjigo doletel izziv novih medijev in komunikacijskih tehnologij: z vsako generacijo so bile na voljo hitreje poti komuniciranja in nova vznemirjenja. Telegraf in poštne usluge, ki so nekoč odigrale osrednjo vlogo v urbanem in ruralnem življenju in so leta 1900 prve prenašale zasebne novice, je nadomestil telefon in po 1990 elektronska pošta. Vsaka naslednja pridobitev je prinašala novosti v oblikah sprostitev, ki so izzvale knjigo. Utopično vizijo najboljše dosegljive knjižnice, v kateri bo sleherno natisnjeno delo dostopno z osebnega računalnika, splet povezanih digitalnih besedil, ki domujejo v računalniškem spominu, je zasenčila zaskrbljenost zaradi cenzure. Založniki posegajo po novih tehnologijah in razpošiljajo elektronsko natisnjene izvode knjig po svetu v nekaj minutah ter izdajajo identične spletne izvode v natančno istem

trenutku po vsem svetu. Panoga vzporedno – čeprav malokdaj istočasno – množično proizvaja in distribuira elektronske in broširane knjige. Do konca stoletja je knjiga postala zgolj eden od mnogih možnih načinov komuniciranja idej ali pripovedovanja zgodb; na prelomu stoletja so skrbi o smrti knjige kot fizičnega objekta in posredovalca nacionalnega kulturnega izraza dobivale precejšnjo težo. Je bila knjiga prepočasna za svojo žetev in preobsežna za branje? So se ljudje odvrnili k hitrejšim medijem? Je knjiga forma, ki je prišla iz mode?

V prvem desetletju enaindvajsetega stoletja se nadaljujejo izzivi za status in vrednost knjig. Ali gre za resno skrb ali pa je knjiga trdovratnejša in trajnejša forma, ki jo pisatelji in založniki vsake generacije preoblikujejo, da se prilaga njihovemu sodobnemu literarnemu trgu?

Februar 2012