John B. Thompson, **Book Wars: The Digital Revolution in Publishing**, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2021, 450 pp., $35.00 (hardcover), $28.00 (eBook).

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John B. Thompson's ***Book Wars: The Digital Revolution in Publishing*** provides a satisfying sequel to his previous analysis of Anglo-American book publishing, *Merchants of Culture* (Thompson, 2013). While the rise of digital was part of that story, in *Book Wars*, the question of whether and how digital communication technology has revolutionized publishing takes center stage. The author answers these questions expansively, considering not just the obvious—such as the rise of the ebook, or Amazon's dominance in book retailing—but less apparent impacts of digital communication technologies, from changes in how physical books are printed, to the role of social media platforms as gateways for new authors, to how ecommerce is influencing brick-and-mortar bookselling.
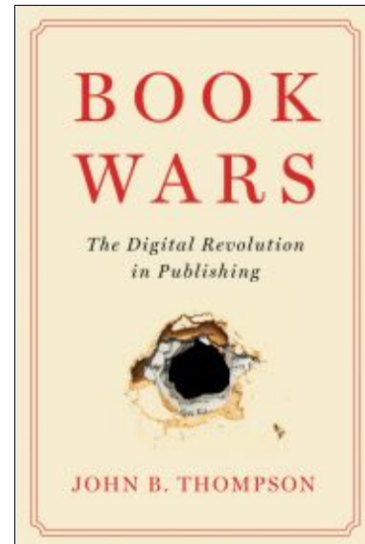
Book Wars brings depth and empirical richness to its account of the rapidly changing publishing industry, while contributing to theoretical and conceptual debates about digital platforms and culture industries. The project overlaps with other critical media studies works on publishing, such as Ted Striphas's (2009) *The Late Age of Print* and Simone Murray's (2018) *The Digital Literary Sphere*. Its distinctive contributions include its focus on what the digital revolution has meant for book publishing across many different parts of the industry (primarily in the UK and the United States) and the extent of industry access that the author reports from.

For an industry focused on storytelling, it is appropriate that *Book Wars* presents much of its evidence in the form of compelling stories. Drawing on interviews with industry entrepreneurs, employees, and authors, Thompson highlights personal accounts of the changes wrought by digital, while connecting these experiences to the social, economic, and technological conditions that structured them. In order to push back on any temptation to view "digital disruption" in publishing through the lens of technological determinism, he offers stories not just of the startups and companies that have thrived in the last 25 years, but of the companies that failed and foundered, both large and small (p. 415). Through these stories, we get a glimpse of some of the roads not taken, and the contingent nature of how industries and creatives respond to new technological possibilities. Chapter 2, for example, tells the stories of Byliner and Atavist Books—both companies that tried to "reinvent" the form of the book for digital delivery, in terms of length and multimedia components—and how economics, as well as distribution and promotional infrastructures, prevented success, despite the quality of the products.

Book Wars often advances its conceptual arguments through comparisons with how digital technologies changed other media industries, particularly music and video. Predictions of the death of the

physical book and traditional publishing turned out to be exaggerated; we learn that the major publishers and traditional revenue sources (for example, from sales of physical books) have not changed as much in the books business as they have in other media industries. Thompson attributes this difference to the importance of context and culture, or the way "the messiness of the social world . . . determines what impact new technologies will have and the extent to which, if at all, they will disrupt existing institutions and practices" (p. viii).

At 450 pages, *Book Wars* is substantial, but remains accessible to an array of readers, from scholars in book studies, media industries, and political economy, to graduate and undergraduate students, industry professionals, and general readers. Thompson's writing is engaging and remarkably free of jargon. Part of the length is due to a wealth of tables and graphs, from both publicly available data and corporate data provided by interviewees. Thompson also provides charts and graphics that explain the patterns he has observed through typologies and visualizations. The book's 11 substantive chapters are clearly organized by topic, allowing the reader to home in on aspects of publishing in the digital age that most interest them, be it the development of the ebook, the scramble over digital publishing rights to backlists, the challenges for marketing books in a digital marketplace, the explosion in self-publishing, or the rise of ebook via subscription, among other topics.

Thompson addresses how publishing has been affected by changes up and down the supply chain in the wake of digital. This approach is consistent with greater attention in media industry studies across the whole supply chain, as reflected in collections like *Point of Sale: Analyzing Media Retail* (Herbert & Johnson, 2020) and *Distribution Revolution* (Curtin, Holt, & Sanson, 2014). From the business of actually printing books, whether conventionally or "on demand," to changes in publishers' historical function as gatekeepers, to book marketing, distribution, and retailing, *Book Wars* conceptualizes book publishing within a larger ecosystem of institutions and practices.

The book's focus is industries and cultural production, but readers—although not examined directly—also get their due. For example, the industry had trouble predicting reader interest in digital books. While the launch of Amazon's Kindle and the explosion in the availability of ebooks in 2007 led to growth in this format that surprised many publishers, the flattening out of ebook sales in 2013–2014 and subsequent decline was also largely unanticipated. New publishing models, from companies like Unbound and Inkshares, that incorporate crowdfunding to gauge reader interest in new and self-published titles, show how readers have more say over what gets published than in "old media" industrial models. Indeed, one of Thompson's concluding observations is that conventional publishers are starting to realize that their primary relationship cannot just be with authors—they also need to connect directly with readers.

Thompson's take on the power of readers is a balanced one; yes, readers have more voice in the digital age, but dominant distribution platforms like Amazon, in turn, have new tools to shape and nudge what readers will consume. This perspective reflects a broader tendency in *Book Wars* to consider reasons for both optimism and pessimism in terms of how digital technologies will shape the worlds of writing, publishing, and reading. Thompson celebrates the proliferation of published authors, even if many of them do not make money or find a large audience for their books, noting that making a living from writing is only one kind of reward that writers seek. He validates the creative worlds of fan fiction, erotica, romance novels,

and young adult fiction that have enjoyed particular success in the worlds of ebooks, self-publishing, and serialized fiction on a platform like Wattpad. He brings attention to books like Andy Weir's *The Martian* (2014)—consistently rejected by mainstream publishers but appreciated by a large online audience who convinced the author to self-publish in different ebook formats, leading to it being picked up by a conventional publisher and becoming a bestseller.

At the same time, Thompson is clear-eyed about the threats to books as outlets for creativity, self-expression, and enrichment of the public sphere, along with the economic conditions needed to support these outcomes, posed by the rise of powerful platforms. The title *Book Wars* is not necessarily apt for every chapter, many of which describe things that sound more like experimentation and evolution. But it is apt when considering two high-stakes "battles," both decided in high-level U.S. courts. The first of these was the fight by American publishers against Google's Library initiatives (ultimately landing in the Supreme Court in 2016), which made books in digital formats searchable to enhance the quality of Google's search results and showed results in excerpt form. The second, the Department of Justice's antitrust case, charged collusion among large publishers and Apple in setting ebook prices in response to Amazon's insistence on pricing ebooks very low to build the market for ebooks and the Kindle. Thompson argues that these conflicts illustrate the clash between two quite different systems of value. While publishers and book retailers trade in ideas and entertainment, digital platforms like Google and Amazon trade in the information commodities generated by online activity. Thompson convincingly argues that, unfettered and unregulated, these digital platforms will undermine the revenue models required to sustain high-quality book publishing. Thompson lays responsibility on readers and regulators, but also argues that publishers themselves must develop alternatives to their dependence on Amazon, given the ways in which the tech giant functions both as a publishing competitor and the leading marketing and distribution platform.

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