

Publishing studies: the search for an elusive academic object

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Libellarium, VIII, 1 (2015): 139 – 145.

UDC: 655:378(44)=111

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15291/libellarium.v8i1.221>

Professional paper

Abstract

This paper questions the validity of the so-called “publishing studies” as an academic discipline, while trying to situate them within the field of social sciences and to contextualize their success. It argues that a more appropriate frame could be adopted to describe what people studying the transformations of book publishing do – or should do – both at a theoretical and methodological level.

The paper begins by providing an overview of the scholarly and academic context in France as far as book publishing is concerned, highlighting its genesis and current development. It goes on to underline the main pitfalls that such a sub-field as publishing studies is faced with, before making suggestions as to the bases for a stimulating analysis of publishing, making a case for an interdisciplinary approach nurtured by social sciences. The paper is based on a long-term field study on independent presses in France, together with a survey of literature on the subject.

KEYWORDS: publishing studies, book publishing, methodology, social sciences.

Introduction

In this paper, I would like to question the validity of the so-called “publishing studies” as an academic sub-field, and to try and think through some implications of the term. To do so, I will examine the case of France, which has developed a specific approach to publishing, while providing a broader picture in order to contextualize the emergence of studies such as “publishing studies” in the academic world.

I would like to argue that the term is, if convenient, far from neutral, as it carries some untoward implications. In my view, a more appropriate frame should be adopted to describe what people studying book publishing do, whether from an economic, sociological or historical perspective.

I will begin by providing an overview of the academic context in France as far as book publishing is concerned, highlighting the main features of this sub-field. I will then refer to some recent transformations in the European academic field which help understand the emergence of studies such as “publishing studies”. Finally, some suggestions will be made regarding what might be the bases for a stimulating analysis of publishing today from an academic perspective.

A brief review of the academic context in France

I must begin by making an embarrassing confession: I had never come across the expression “publishing studies” until May 2014, when I attended the Florence “By the Book” Conference. As I have been working on book publishing for several years, it means that I have been doing publishing studies without knowing it, and that I’m shamefully ill-informed. This puzzled me and prompted me to do a bit of research on the topic. I suspected that, maybe, France was isolated in that respect - French people love to think they are special - and that this sub-field was both well-structured and dynamic in other countries. So I went to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, in search of data about publishing studies, hoping to find material about the genesis and characteristics of this sub-field.

The results were disappointing: I could hardly gather three volumes remotely related to “publishing studies” (the two terms were not even linked), and they were not very helpful. Historians seem to be the only ones to have indirectly tackled the issue of a sub-field devoted to books and publishing, notably the 4 volumes of *Book publishing* edited by John Feather in 2011. When I tried Google, I got luckier, but all references pointed to training programs in the United Kingdom or the United States. There was nothing about research programs or debates between academics and experts on the subject.

This reassured me a little: the term has apparently little currency in academic circles, even outside France. “Publishing studies” refer to vocational courses in Anglo-Saxon countries, and not to a coherent or even debated area of research. Of course, there are numerous publications *about* publishing – I couldn’t even begin to provide a full bibliography here. These books and articles address publishing as an economic sector and as a complex socio-economic practice, but they do not make up a structured field of study in the academic sense. Publishing is an area of scholarly study among many other – recorded music or film industry for example – for academics trained as historians, sociologists, economists, media analysts, etc., but not a field of study per se.

I’ll now try and be more specific by giving a broad brush picture of the situation in a precise national context. In France, like in most countries, there is no such thing as a unified sub-field addressing book publishing or “publishing studies”. Scholars researching and teaching the subject can however be found in different faculties and established disciplines. Historians of the book were the first to study publishing, and they did so in an original fashion after World War Two, in the

wake of the *Ecole des Annales* and its “totalizing view of history”. Publishing was associated with the study of global cultural and social transformations. It was a social history of the book paying close attention to its conditions of material production and overlooking no aspect, whether technical, artistic or financial. It strove to be a “comprehensive history of print”, as Febvre and Martin put it in their seminal work *The coming of the book*. This tradition is still very vivid in France today, with challenging research going on, notably with historians such as Roger Chartier (1994) and Jean-Yves Mollier (1988).

Publishing is also an area of interest for sociology. Sociologists of culture focus, among other things, on books as symbolic goods (Bourdieu 1996) or “singularities” (Karpik 2010) that question the line between the sphere of culture and that of the market. Current works are mainly concerned with the strategies of agents and of publishing structures, but they also pay close attention to historical contexts (Sapiro 2014). Within faculties of economics, cultural economics has been particularly dynamic in recent years, even though it is still marginal area within the discipline. Book publishing, as part of the cultural industries, is one of the sectors under close scrutiny, especially since the digital revolution (Benhamou 2011). Lastly, information and communication sciences, a discipline which was institutionalized in France in the 1970s following the development of media and cultural industries, is also addressing publishing and its current transformations. This discipline is distinctive for combining a variety of methods and tools, drawing on several social sciences (sociology, anthropology, economics, semiotics...) and it is usually referred to as an “inter-discipline”. I&C departments are home to professionally oriented Masters’ degrees in publishing, and they offer research programmes such as the ones which are conducted in the University of Paris 13, in relation with other cultural industries and media - recorded music, visual arts, the cinema, etc. Other postgraduate courses also exist in the humanities departments of several French universities (Paris 3, Paris 4, Cergy-Pontoise, to name just a few), together with shorter (two-year) training programmes in what could be compared to the former British polytechnics (Instituts universitaires de technologie).

What are studies the symptom of? A brief overview of the post-Bologna European context

So what do we have? An area of study, book publishing, that is addressed both by relatively recent applied sciences such as information and communication sciences, and more traditional and comprehensive disciplines such as history, economics, literature and sociology (Passeron 1991). All of them are characterized by specific methods, and by a defined set of theories and objects. The ground is apparently well-covered as far as research and teaching are concerned, so why should we need a new label to circumscribe such a narrow terrain as publishing? And if we do need a new word, what is this one indicative of? More specifically, what is it the symptom of?

One cannot begin to answer these questions without referring to the rise of “studies” in the academic world over the past decades. I don’t have the time to retrace this process, which would be much too complex, but let me just highlight a few points. The phenomenon dates back to the 1950s as far as area studies are concerned. The latter were meant to address the knowledge deficit felt in the United States regarding international studies in the context of the Cold War and of decolonization. Area studies were conceived as interdisciplinary fields of research and scholarship pertaining to particular geographical or cultural regions.

It wasn’t until the 1970s that another kind of studies, that I will call, for lack of a better word, “object studies” – i.e. studies that are defined by their object of study like cultural or feminist studies – came to prominence. At the time, the objective was to create new courses catering for new social demands, whether arising from the public or the private sector - government bodies and agencies and the media for example. But it was also triggered by the need to develop an interdisciplinary approach to areas of knowledge and social life attracting a growing interest– such as gender, sexuality or mass culture - which were disregarded by traditional disciplines. This dual aspect of studies – the first one corresponding to an exogenous incentive (being professionally-oriented), the other responding to an endogenous (scientific) incentive still holds true today, generating unresolved tensions.

Forty years on, the context has changed dramatically. The idea of knowledge per se, of knowledge as a tool of emancipation, has come under severe attack since the 1980s and the decision to create a unified “knowledge market” in Europe in which universities are meant to compete with one another (Winkin 2003). The Bologna process (1999) has signalled the waning autonomy of the academic field, with the prevalence of economic values and assessment tools (as exemplified by the notorious Shanghai ranking) derived from the corporate sphere and the drop in public funding. As a result, universities are summoned to be efficient, to produce “useful” research - although of course, there is no such thing as a clear-cut line between useful and useless research - and to groom students for the labour market. Professionalization has therefore become a catchword.

In such a context, humanities and social sciences departments have little to offer. For indeed, what’s the use of a historian or a specialist of 18th-century poetry when the main yardstick is usefulness and profit? In order to avoid losing too many students and staff, faculties have set up courses responding to these new expectations with vocational diplomas related to the cultural industries (publishing, audiovisual industries, etc.) which have proven very successful. Hence the emergence of publishing studies programmes in direct connection with the publishing industry.

An agenda for publishing studies (or whatever they are called)

Far from me the idea of advocating academic programmes disconnected from the outside world, but the trend towards an education shaped by economic needs, oblivious of the fact that universities are also meant to fulfil other functions, notably cultural and social functions, seems dangerous to say the least. Informed analysis, critical views armed with theory is what makes academic research and teaching invaluable: to go down uncharted territory, to reach beyond the commenting of the latest technological development is crucial to the making of a valuable contribution to books and to book publishing today.

It is true that there has always been a tension, ever since the foundation of universities in the 11th century, between the ideal of autonomous knowledge - autonomous from temporal powers such as the Church and the king - and applied, “useful” knowledge. The dismissal of a scholarly, abstract training disconnected from the needs of society is as ancient as these institutions in Europe. The only novelty today is that the pressures mostly come from the economic world, or indeed from political spheres which have internalized the economic *nomos* (for a thorough examination of this historical background, see Duval2013). The dream of universities that would deliver tailor-made diplomas for corporate businesses seems closer than ever.

I would like to argue that sub-fields such as “publishing studies”, which define themselves in connection with a specific business sector and carry little legitimacy in the academic world, are particularly vulnerable in that respect. Why is that? Roughly speaking, because a scholarly field which is not firmly rooted in a scientific tradition - research techniques, methods, theories... - runs the risk of producing *expert discourses*, or a mix between academic and business guidelines with analytical perspective and autonomy. In an ever-changing environment, providing students with solid general, analytical knowledge, together with immediately tradable skills, is probably the best combination one can offer them for their future development as human beings, citizens and job-seekers. What is at stake is to get the right balance between a critical conception, where knowledge is conceived as a universal disconnected from short-term pursuits, and a more pragmatic approach, attuned to the changes and needs of the book industry. On that front, one cannot be very optimistic in the light of recent developments as far as higher education and research is concerned in Europe.

Having said this, should we discard the term “publishing studies”, on the grounds that it could be a Trojan horse for unwelcome changes in the academic world?

Could its use be limited to describe specialized training courses and Master’s degrees while research is carried out under the umbrella of established disciplines, as is the case today? That’s not for me to say. But I think the very least would be to question the narrow remit of such a sub-field, its flimsy scientific foundations, and the absence of a coherent and structured identity.

To conclude, I would like to remind you of what Robert Darnton wrote about the history of the book, which seems to me a very relevant agenda for publishing studies or whatever the area is called:

Books refuse to be contained within the confines of a single discipline when treated as objects of study. Neither history nor literature nor sociology nor bibliography can do justice to all the aspects of the life of a book. By its very nature, therefore, the history of books must be international in scale and interdisciplinary in method. But it need not lack conceptual coherence, because books belong to circuits of communication that operate in consistent patterns, however complex they may be (Darnton 1990).

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Sažetak

Studije nakladništva: u potrazi za neuhvatljivim akademskim objektom

U radu se propituje vjerodostojnost studija nakladništva kao akademske discipline, pri čemu ih se pokušava smjestiti unutar područja društvenih znanosti i kontekstualizirati njihov uspjeh. Argumentira se da je moguće usvojiti primjereniji okvir kako bi se opisalo što rade – ili bi trebali raditi – ljudi koji proučavaju promjene u izdavanju knjiga, i na teorijskoj i na metodološkoj razini. Rad započinje pregledom znanstvenog i akademskog konteksta u Francuskoj koji se odnosi na nakladništvo knjiga, naglašava se njegova geneza i trenutni razvoj. Ističu se zamke s kojima se suočava pod-područje poput nakladničkih studija i naposljetku daju prijedlozi polazišta za stimulativnu analizu nakladništva, zagovarajući interdisciplinarni pristup koji njeguju društvene znanosti. Rad se temelji na dugoročnom proučavanju područja nezavisnog tiska u Francuskoj što je nadopunjeno pregledom literature u ovom području.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: nakladničke studije, nakladništvo knjiga, metodologija, društvene znanosti.