

Publishing studies: what else?

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Abstract

This paper intends to reposition “publishing studies” in the long process that goes from the beginning of book history to the current research on cultural industries. It raises questions about interdisciplinarity and the possibility of considering publishing independently of other sectors of the media and cultural offerings.

Publishing is now included in a large range of industries and, at the same time, analyses tend to become more and more segmented according to production sectors and scientific fields. In addition to the problems created, from the professional point of view, by this double movement, this one requires a questioning of the concept of “publishing studies”.

KEYWORDS: publishing studies, cultural industries, France.

The ideas which will be developed here concern research on publishing in France. We'll look briefly at the history of the research in question, the disciplines involved, and their relations with other fields of activity.

At first one must recall the pioneering role played by Henri-Jean Martin, whose seminal work, *L'Apparition du livre*, co-authored with Lucien Febvre and published in 1958 in a prestigious collection dedicated to “L'Évolution de l'humanité”, brought the book into mainstream historiography. They subtitled their work “Le livre, ce ferment”, or, roughly, “The book as a catalyst”, and made it clear that they were going beyond techniques – those of papermaking, printing and binding – as well as utilitarian considerations, notably regarding education. They discussed the importance of books in political, economic and social history, as part of a project which was cross-disciplinary, and which became still more so as it developed into the monumental four-volume *Histoire de l'édition française*, written by Martin in collaboration with Roger Chartier, and published between 1982 and 1986. Martin's work demonstrated the transition from the history of the book to that of publishing, in an enlarged perspective which, without neglecting any aspect of writing in the evolution of humanity, also began taking

into account the technical, economic, social, commercial and legal aspects of the production and circulation of books.

Martin's work was carried forward by researchers who, besides Roger Chartier, included Robert Damien, Michel Melot, Christian Jacob and J-Y Mollier, all of whom contributed to an important symposium in 2008 entitled "Fifty years in the history of the book".

Though essentially occupied by historians, this period of, now, almost 60 years has seen other disciplines begin to take an interest in books and publishing. We might think, for example, of sociologists such as Christophe Evans, Olivier Donnat and Sylvie Octobre, who have done fruitful research on the book industry, and on reading. We might also think about the contributions made by semiology, often related to commercial activity. Then there are the economists, particularly those working on culture. One of the most prominent of these, in France, is Françoise Benhamou. And finally, there is the research that is taking place in the sciences of information and communication, of the type that is done at LabSIC.

If we compare the work carried out in various disciplines on the segmentation of publishing into sectors such as literature, books for young adults, art books, comic books and school texts, the territory turns out to be complex, and there is a certain tension between, on the one hand, a need for multidisciplinary and intersectorial approaches, and, on the other, a need for specialised and monosectorial approaches.

This observation, of itself, is both interesting and problematic.

It is interesting because it demonstrates the dynamism of research that has gradually been extended to publishing as a whole, focussing on the diversity of publishing activities, their modes of conception and circulation, and economic models, along with readership, retailing and promotion. There again, researchers are also becoming increasingly specialised across science in general.

But the observation is at the same time problematic, precisely because of this growing specialisation, which entails the risk of losing a wide-ranging perspective, and thus failing to give an account of overall dynamics and mutations. The problem of specialisation can also be seen in the broader framework of industrial, educational and media cultures, or that of the creative industries. We might ask, for example, to what extent it is possible, at present, to carry out research on the publishing of school texts without looking at on-line documentary research and the development of educational platforms. Likewise, studying "young adults" without also studying TV series would mean ignoring the phenomenon of hybridisation that is at the root of "fanfiction", as is the case for the connection between cookery and DIY, with the numerous web sites that offer content in these fields. And can travel guides really be studied without looking at the development of geolocation for identifying landmarks and leisure facilities, or the web sites that give information about accommodation and restaurants?

More than ever, research must look at publishing in its historical, political, economic and sociological dimensions. But it must also incorporate work on games, video production, the fashion and luxury industries, leisure activities and lifestyles.

This necessity is not radically new, but there is a question of feasibility. How is one to resolve the contrast between specialisation and breadth of research? A part of the answer to this question can no doubt be found in the fact that research methods have been tending to organise themselves around interdisciplinary teams, either for the purpose of specific projects or within organisations such as the “laboratory of excellence”, Labex.

This state of affairs provokes reflection on the very idea of “publishing studies”, a term which has the merit of designating an object, namely publishing, and which is applied, for example, in programmes for the training of “publishing professionals”. But there is a certain pressure to see such studies, from the viewpoint of the social sciences, as being integral to research on the cultural, media, educational and creative industries, whose relations with publishing can be looked at from a variety of methodological angles.

The issue for researchers and those who work in publishing itself is to achieve an understanding of the changes that are taking place on the macro scale – at the international or intersectorial level – without losing the specificities of publishing as an activity which, we might note, is no longer the sole preserve of publishing houses, but has been encroached on by industrial giants – on-line marketing or telephony companies – as well as “pure players” from other sectors, and self-publishing structures.

Three examples will give some concrete illustrations of work that is taking place in this field.

The first example is that of “Geo-culture: La France vue par ses écrivains”, a digital, interactive, free-of-charge service based on the principle of pairing up locations around France with extracts from literature. From a professional viewpoint, this can be seen as a promotional tool. From a research viewpoint, it stands at a crossroad between geography, history, literature, law, economics and pedagogy. The second example is that of social networks for readers, such as Babelio, Booknode, Libfly and Myboox. From the industry’s point of view, one can of course look at what these networks bring to the promotion of books, and to reading. But one can also look at their ability (or inability) to increase cultural diversity, with regard to the emphasis they place on best sellers and stars.

The third example concerns studies on publishing that are being carried out in emerging countries. A strict focus on publishing might aim at producing data on these countries’ future prospects, in terms of domestic markets and export strategies. An interdisciplinary approach, on the other hand, could shed light on socio-political and socio-educative issues such as cultural dominance, the free circulation of ideas, editorial independence and educational policy.

Finally, the enlargement of the perspectives used to study publishing activity is a reminder that books and, in more general terms, content can be political objects, as they were at the birth of printing. This encourages a dispassionate view and a critical dimension that can have a bearing on the question of signification, and that of content, which, as Henri-Jean Martin put it, may be considered as a “catalyst”.

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Sažetak

Nakladničke studije: što još?

Namjera je rada repositionirati nakladničke studije u sklop dugog procesa koji se proteže od početka povijesti knjige do suvremenih istraživanja kulturnih industrija. Rad postavlja pitanja o interdisciplinarnosti i mogućnosti da se nakladništvo razmatra neovisno o drugim sektorima medija i kulturne ponude. Nakladništvo je dio širokog industrijskog spektra, a analize istodobno postaju sve segmentiranije prema sektorima proizvodnje i znanstvenim područjima. Iz perspektive struke, uz probleme koji nastaju zbog takvog dvojnog usmjerenja, nužno je propitati i preispitati koncept ‘nakladničkih studija’.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: nakladničke studije, kulturna industrija, Francuska.