

Publishing studies: being part of a cultural practice plus x ?

Christoph Bläsi, christoph.blaesi@uni-mainz.de

Book Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz

Libellarium, VIII, 1 (2015): 147 – 156.

UDC: [655:008]:001.5=111

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15291/libellarium.v8i1.223>

Research paper

Abstract

In some parts of the world, Publishing Studies are a fairly well-established field of research as well as of higher education. Not least since this is not so much the case in continental Europe, the Publishing Studies community increasingly sees a more elaborated self-concept as an important prerequisite for a prosperous further development of the field in research as well as in teaching. This paper starts off by relating the question for an advanced self-concept of Publishing Studies to the question what criteria have to be fulfilled to call a field (like Publishing Studies) a scholarly discipline. As the second source for the possible formation of a more elaborate self-concept, the paper presents the first results of an ongoing empirical research project. In this projects, extensive expert interviews with representatives of UK Publishing Studies study programs and research institutions are evaluated to shed light on the core questions related to Publishing Studies as a discipline / „discipline“ in a bottom-up manner. After presenting a very clear and differentiated North American view as an additional point of reference, a contribution to the discussion on Publishing Studies is proposed.

KEY WORDS: publishing studies, publishing studies self-conception, scientific discipline.

Introduction

Publishing Studies have started to reflect on their status more systematically in the last couple of years, both as a field of study as well as a higher education program. From the continental European point of view (where Publishing Studies typically come as a part of the more comprehensive Book Studies, which also cover book history), this has not least been triggered by their unusually strong ties with their ‘reference’ industry (compared to most other humanities disciplines)–and by the suspicion this arouses among fellow humanities academics occasionally. Moreover–this is more general and also holds e.g. for the Anglo-Saxon instances of Publishing Studies–scholarly work and higher

education contributions labeled ‘Publishing Studies’ have distinctively many and large intersections with various academic disciplines: Publishing Studies import propositions, constructs and processes, that is to say theories and methods. It is therefore only logical that, and this is another observation, one can find Publishing Studies units at universities affiliated to a whole range of different disciplinary units: some belong to business studies departments, others to English studies or to information science ones.

In short, Publishing Studies seem to be exceptionally trans-disciplinary by design, as it were—in the sense of transcending the formation of disciplines through vocational requirements as well as through the integrative power of theoretical foundations (cf. e.g. the mission statement of the German University of Bielefeld in Germany: <http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/Universitaet/Serviceangebot/leitbild.html>). As mentioned above, Publishing Studies transcend boundaries of theories, methods—and of university departments. They typically have a close relationship to vocational purposes (and effects). This is exemplified by the fact that many study programs include teachers from the industry, that students (and teachers) work on case studies from the industry—and not least that Publishing Studies alumni get jobs in the industry fairly directly and easily.

As Publishing Studies scholars we could just say that we agree to this description of the status-quo and go on doing our scholarly work. This would be an option since most of us seem to be quite happy with the situation. On the other hand, we could embrace it as a productive challenge to our self-concept we might want to take a stand on – there are in fact issues arising from these attributions of trans-disciplinarity and remarkable vocational strands:

- Do Publishing Studies have a core set of theories and methods?
- Does the situation as described allow Publishing Studies to develop unique, original and recognizable research programs? What could such programs look like?
- How does suitable Publishing Studies teaching look like, given the situation?
- What is the most suitable position for a Publishing Studies unit in the organizational structure of a university?
- What does this mean for the consolidated academic reputation of Publishing Studies in a wider scholarly community?

Focusing on numerous and close relations with other disciplines and the strong vocational strand, I will of course not be able to answer all of these questions. I will, however, try to make a contribution to ongoing debates by sketching a few relevant aspects for a self-concept of Publishing Studies that might help to answer them.

To generate and disseminate knowledge (and solutions—see below) about the current book, its economical and cultural context, in the light of their digital transformations, can probably be seen as the primary objective of Publishing Studies.

I would like to mention the last motivating factor that makes me interested in the discussion on the self-concept of Publishing Studies: relevant work about the subjects just specified is done by the scholars from other ‘disciplines’—here are a few examples:

- Murray, Simone: *The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation* (Routledge, 2011). (discipline: English studies)
- König, Andreas: *Cognitive Framing and Incumbent Inertia in Response to Technological Discontinuities. . . .* (in the booktrade, C.B.). Berlin: Pro Business, 2009. (discipline: business studies / strategic management)
- Wagner, T.; Hess, T.; Benlian, A. (2012) *The Role of Product Involvement in Digital and Physical Reading – A comparative Study of Customer Reviews of eBooks vs. Printed Books*; in: *Proceedings of the 20th European Conference on Information Systems (ECIS)*, Barcelona, Spain, 2012. (discipline: business informatics)

Having pointed at fields, most of which can undoubtedly be seen as disciplines, that have a productive relation with Publishing Studies, it will be interesting to have a closer look at which specific features make them productive for Publishing Studies: apart from the object itself—in this case: books, publishing houses, the publishing process, etc.—important features certainly are in the domain of constructs, propositions and processes in the form of the theories and methods they use.

Beyond the object(s) of research: what are the distinctive features of (groups of) disciplines?

With respect to decisive features of academic disciplines, I base my thoughts on Balzer (2009) in the tradition of the German-style „Wissenschaftstheorie“ (philosophy of science). Slightly simplified, a scholarly theory is for Balzer a statement or a set of statements on structures identified in parts of the world chosen as research focus, systematically based on data about these structures. Having introduced this, Balzer posits a set of different modes of transition (“methods”) around such scholarly theories. The first type of transition is the one from data obtained from parts of the world to theories (this is called induction), the second the one from theories to statements about parts of the world (this is called deduction). An example of an induction is the gravitation theory as a result of numerous observations of objects falling down (data), one of the latter the statement that an unclashed object will fall down given the

gravitation theory (this is the typical case of a theory-based prediction). A third type, Balzer says, is hermeneutics (see below). According to Balzer, disciplines differ primarily with respect to how they “organize” scholarly transitions from data to theories / “laws” (by way of induction): one is the scientific one (in the narrow sense) which is used in the (natural) sciences, another central one is the one that applies—as a sort of a metaphor from the natural sciences—methods of empirical social research. This is the case for the so-called social sciences. Moreover, and this is not mentioned by Balzer, there are disciplines that yield theories from doing / simulating / etc., e.g. business informatics (*cf.* Wilde / Hess 2006: 10). In transitions from theories / laws to data (deduction), the groups of disciplines mentioned so far do not differ much. In the case of the humanities, all this is different; their paradigm is hermeneutics in the sense that they intend to understand (!) the observation of the world or, more typically, works of art, e.g. texts, on the background of an existing body of knowledge or to modify a body of knowledge triggered by a contradicting observation. In each case, the facts observed shed light on the body of knowledge and the body of knowledge sheds lights on the facts observed at the same time—this is often described as the hermeneutical circle. Hermeneutics are applied in disciplines like English studies or history. Using one of the modes of transition, different disciplines have come up with and now use the gravitation law (physics), (the theory of) agenda setting (communication studies), the theory of the interchangeability of different types of capital (“Bourdieu”, sociology), etc.

I have presented this since I see the question which disciplines have an influence on Publishing Studies research as the central one.

Preview of upcoming work based on extensive expert interviews in the UK in 2014

I would like to complement the classifying top-down concepts I have provided in the previous section by a bottom-up approach to the self-concept of Publishing Studies. This approach involved interviewing experts in the UK, the country with a particularly varied Publishing Studies institutions as well as study programs landscape. It was the objective of the approach to try to distil a systematic idea of what Publishing Studies are and/or should be from competent statements on topics related to theories, methods, neighbouring disciplines, etc.

With the exception of the slightly opinionated answers to the question whether Publishing Studies are a discipline or not, there is a rather clear general consensus among the scholars interviewed on the topics I raised. What they have to say is not the same, however. But it is— with different emphases—very compatible in most cases. I will base the following on the converging views and attribute them to single scholars only in cases of salience or remarkable outspokenness.

Topic 1: What are the neighbouring disciplines of Publishing Studies?

Neighbouring disciplines are not only ones with which there are explicit research and teaching cooperation, but also the ones from which, more or less overtly, propositions, constructs and processes (like theories, methods, etc.) are taken. These neighbouring disciplines are, according to my interlocutors, primarily book history, English (and other literary, cultural and also linguistic) studies, media studies, communication studies, business studies and information / library / archival studies. This does not have to be explicated any further here, since it is part of the 'workshop' discourse in Publishing Studies. If, however, this insight is applied to an 'average' individual scholar, there is concern among the interlocutors, in how far this necessarily means for him or her to be Jack of all trades, but master of none. Mary Ann Kernan points to a default trap with respect to an inadequate use of empirical methods of social research (e.g. from communication studies), by mentioning a conceivable assignment in an ironic way: go out and do a questionnaire and draw "inappropriate and biased conclusions from 10 people".

Topic 2: What are the theories / theorists most relevant for Publishing Studies?

As core theorists referred to in Publishing Studies reasoning, my interlocutors listed Porter, (Jonathan) Rose, McLuhan, Genette, Thompson, Striphas and Darnton—a good selection from the disciplines identified as neighbouring. With respect to Foucault, Mary Ann Kernan¹ added: a "big hardhitter – if you understand him, use him, if you don't, don't".²

Topic 3: Are Publishing Studies an academic discipline?

With respect to this question, some of the academics I talked to favour the view that Publishing Studies are not (yet) a discipline. This is the case, they say, since Publishing Studies do not have a distinctive (!) set of (own) analytical tools (but borrow them from 'other' disciplines) and since the critical mass of people who really want to "intellectualize" the reasoning about publishing is too small. Some among them say, Publishing Studies could rather be seen as a subdiscipline as it were of other disciplines. On the other side, there is also the view that Publishing Studies are a sufficiently self-contained field of investigation (on objects not tackled by other disciplines adequately for various reasons) and that they show features of a discipline with respect to the following criteria: they do have the objective to understand (and not merely to describe), they can already rely on a considerable body of knowledge and, of course, they have their conferences,

1 Mary Ann Kernan of London City University.

2 Pertaining to a SHARP-L discussion on the theory / theories of the book, which took place in mailing list in 2013, we could add Innis, McLuhan, Kittler, Bourdieu, Luhmann, Warkentin, Cartier, Ong, McGann, Bhaskar, Piper, McKenzie, Kirschenbaum and Eggers.

their publications, etc. This situation “on the way”, some among them say, could be seen a positive thing: they value the ‘broad church’ approach and the ‘right of the greenfields’ that go with it.

Summing up the views expressed concerning the first three topics we can say that Publishing Studies are seen as a field in a network of disciplines, on a way that might result in becoming a discipline itself. The strong relations with other disciplines might have to settle and possibly a qualified subset of the typical ‘import’ disciplines emerge; in the meantime, this position of transition seems to be seen as one of the attractive features of Publishing Studies.

Topic 4: Is there a surplus of the “scholarly”, the “beyond-vocational” in Publishing Studies?

On the one hand, Mary Ann Kernan says that “anywhere where profit is a dirty word, we [Publishing Studies, C.B.] are doomed”; on the other hand – and this is the response to the question – it is likewise true, she says, that there are issues in the central ‘reference industry’ of Publishing Studies, the (profit-oriented !) publishing business, that are typically not tackled there: issues of literacy and reading, effects of stories, pre-literate and post-literate cultures, gender issues, politics, the Anglo-American hegemony in the industry, etc. To tackle such issues is certainly a task for Publishing Studies, then. According to some of my interlocutors, to soar beyond the purely vocational is without alternative given the fact that Publishing Studies programs can never be at the cutting edge of technology and business and therefore got to go beyond the competence-based. Moreover, beyond the vocational does not necessarily only mean more scholarly: looking at publishing as a special case of presenting an argument, of communicating effectively, of managing a message connects publishing and Publishing Studies to other areas of life and professional life in particular and brings it into the focus of other vocational areas (and indeed again the academic disciplines related to them). Mary Ann Kernan adds a very general remark, namely that the assumptions of the students about themselves, but also about the world are of course not necessarily true – and that artistic experiences (creative projects, storytelling, drama and other right-brain activities) are a good way open students minds.

Summing up the responses to this question, we can say that the interlocutors agree on the fact that a purely vocational view of Publishing Studies is not an option: Publishing Studies would miss very relevant issues indeed that typically do not come into focus in the publishing business and they would – in teaching – necessarily impart obsolete competences rather than meta-competencies, as it were. And even with respect to competences, the interlocutors see it as a necessity to broaden the focus to more abstract, less book communication-centric competences – and to areas beyond the vocational and beyond the academic, namely the artistic.

Topic 5: What is the specific contribution of Publishing Studies?

If there are other disciplines working on the objects of Publishing Studies in an appropriate manner (see above)–and independently from the question whether Publishing Studies are a discipline in its own right or not–one could ask what the specific contributions of the field is. Among the corresponding responses of the interlocutors was the position that Publishing Studies (like only very few other [humanities] disciplines) would cross the divide between being academically interesting and demanding on the one hand and truly relevant on the other, relevant in the sense that publishing has been and still is an important driver of societal development. By virtue of that, Publishing Studies would provide innovation and knowledge for the industry very naturally. Alistair McCleery³ relates this observation to an epistemological insight:

A lot of the work we do has to have an application, an interest, a relevance to the industry we´re studying. It´s very hard to do purely research for its own sake, when the object of your research is publishing. [...] If the object of your research is publishing, then I think the very subject of the research is shaping [...] your notion to it [...].

With respect to the ´for its own sake´ statement and also her vision of Publishing Studies, Mary Ann Kernan adds: “I´ve always kicked against the self-feeding nature of the infinitesimal increase in knowledge in the academy for their own sake, that self-referential nature of research.”

It seems, as if the interlocutors would agree that the specific combination of theory and practice is one of the unique contributions of Publishing Studies: since publishing is an important and complex cultural practice, Publishing Studies allow to combine demanding scholarly questions with the sense of involvement in something relevant. The vibrant industry and culture, moreover, keep on shaping the notions involved and inhibit unproductive self-referentiality.

Previous thoughts on the specific nature of Publishing Studies by John Maxwell

How do the provisional results of my research concerning thoughts about Publishing Studies in the UK in 2014 presented in the previous chapter fit with the thoughts of someone who has already dwelled on the contemporary perception of Publishing Studies? John Maxwell was not only an additional interviewee last year in a sort of a triangulation exercise, he has also written an inspiring article on the topic recently. In this article, Maxwell says that the disrupted situation in the book industry and the book media system we observe at the moment requires “guts, resilience, and a high tolerance for ambiguity” – and that is, he goes on, exactly what communities of practice have. According to

him, there are a few important principles to adhere to in describing an adequate form of Publishing Studies. The first one is that publishing is not only an industrial activity and an art, but also a craft: “[...] beyond storytelling; beyond reaching an audience, beyond filtering and amplifying and framing, there is also the business of making things, and especially making things that last” (Maxwell 2014). Therefore, and this is another principle, the discourse of publishing is also embodied in its artifacts – it is essential “to research and develop, because the discourse of publishing is embodied in its artifacts and products at least as much as in what people are saying. It is discourse + practice”. (Maxwell 2014). Also as a principle, the freedom from restrictions and the risk-tolerance at universities should be used for doing things: “[A] university program and graduate students can afford to do experimental work and exploratory R&D without worrying about sacrificing next season’s list, or the next issue, or the quarterly bottom line. We can afford to play with techniques and tools and methods of doing things.” (Maxwell 2014). In any case, he says, publishing requires a deep contextual awareness. And John Maxwell adds the final aspect: “[...] in times of rapid change in industry structure and the professional world, a focus on entrepreneurship is a growing theme within publishing studies, owing to a general trend toward this disaggregation of publishing functions” (Maxwell 2014). John Maxwell’s bottom line is this:

These many facets and opportunities combine to make an exciting and vibrant picture of publishing studies and publishing education, perhaps in some contrast to the now-popular conception of publishing as a beleaguered sector with diminishing prospects. The rich disciplinary connections also position publishing as a rich interdisciplinary field, taking energy and inspiration from a variety of sources and bringing it to bear on a grand tradition with a strong vocational calling. (Maxwell 2014).

Apart from the view that the current transitions in the publishing industry are so profound that they call for a resilience that only a community of practice can develop, John Maxwell’s thoughts can be summarized in saying that in publishing relevant insights can only be gained taking the products of the process down to their artifact nature into account – and that this has a bearing on adequate publishing research and teaching. Moreover, he says, universities offer a space, where this can be achieved not least in the form of experimental doing as part of a cultural practice. It is important for John Maxwell that such an approach is an active contribution to a more positive attitude towards the future of publishing (which faces, this is true, a whole series of challenges). Not least the ongoing disintegration of the publishing value chain / network would suggest to implement such a positive and active attitude in a logical way in the form of entrepreneurial activities as attractive professional alternatives for Publishing Studies alumni.

Conclusions: cultural practice plus multi-faceted scholarship plus critical thinking plus embedding into other cultural practices (plus, maybe, artistic limbering up)

Subject to a probable confirmation (and of course elaboration) by my forthcoming paper summarizing the results of my research on the basis of the 2014 expert interviews, it can be said that there are strong indications that the doing, the participation in a cultural practice are a constitutive as well as a distinctive element of Publishing Studies. The fact that Publishing Studies are strongly influenced by the neighbouring disciplines and inherently interdisciplinary contributes to a view that they are still in a process of shaping. This is, however, probably less distinctive and needs to take the second place. It is interesting to see that current Publishing Studies work—and this is pretty distinctive again—can quite naturally use hermeneutics (like e.g. English studies do) to develop results (sometimes in the form of theories), but also methods of empirical social research (like e.g. communication studies do) or—this connects very well to the relevance of being part of a cultural practice—indeed by implementing solutions (like business informatics or information science do). Especially with respect to the latter, the potential of critical thinking, of scrutinizing (tacit) assumptions influencing the cultural practice, as intuitive they might be, is absolutely essential to make it legitimize their part in academia. The analogue of the latter requirement in teaching is rising beyond the purely vocational – and also beyond focusing too much on the vertical cultural practice rather than embedding it in a larger framework of related cultural practices.

References

- Balzer, W. 2009. *Die Wissenschaft und ihre Methoden. Grundsätze der Wissenschaftstheorie. Ein Lehrbuch*. Freiburg / München: Alber.
- Maxwell, J. 2014. "Publishing education in the 21st century and the role of the university." *The Journal of Electronic Publishing*. Accessed March 18, 2015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/3336451.0017.205>.
- Wilde, T., and T. Hess. 2006. „Methodenspektrum der Wirtschaftsinformatik: Überblick und Portfoliobildung. Arbeitsbericht 2/2006.“ Accessed January 23, 2015. http://www.wim.bwl.uni-muenchen.de/download/epub/ab_2006_02.pdf

Sažetak

Nakladničke studije: dio kulturne prakse plus x?

U nekim dijelovima svijeta nakladničke su studije etablirano područje istraživanja i visokog obrazovanja i iako to u kontinentalnoj Europi nije slučaj, sve se više uočava potreba za jasnije elaboriranom koncepcijom nakladništva koja se nameće kao važan preduvjet za daljnji razvoj područja i u smislu istraživanju i u smislu poučavanju. Rad polazi od usporedbe napredne samo-koncepcije nakladničkih studija i pitanja kriterija koji trebaju biti ispunjeni da bi se neko područje (poput nakladničkih studija) moglo nazvati znanstvenom disciplinom. Kao dodatan izvor za moguće jasnije oblikovanje takve samo-koncepcije, u radu se predstavljaju prvi rezultati empirijskog istraživačkog projekta koji je još uvijek u tijeku, a kojem su osnova dubinski stručni intervjui s predstavnicima nakladničkih studija, studijskih programa i znanstvenih institucija u Ujedinjenom Kraljevstvu. Njihovi odgovori daju uvid u temeljna pitanja povezana s nakladničkim studijima kao disciplinom, koristeći pritom pristup *gradnje odozdo (bottom-up)*. Nakon predstavljanja jasnog i različitog sjevernoameričkog pogleda kao dodatne referentne točke, rad daje daljnje priloge raspravi o nakladničkim studijama.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: nakladničke studije, samo-koncepcija nakladničkih studija, znanstvena disciplina.