The creative role of the publisher

What

PUBLISHERS DO
Only thirty or so years ago the alchemy of publishing was the same relatively simple process that it had been for centuries. The publishing world was traditional and reclusive. Most publishing houses were personally owned. Nobody made a lot of money; nobody lost a lot of money; nobody borrowed a lot of money. It was still the age of the accomplished generalist. Many publishers acted as their own editors, production managers and sales managers.

Publishing today has changed in structure and method, but not in substance. It remains what it has always been – the art of creative and effective communication which is seminal to a democratic society. As Lewis Thomas, the American author/scientist recently exulted: “. . . before an enterprise reaches completion, as we explore, we call out to each other, communicate, publish papers, cry out on finding.”

Most publishers today, contrary to popular belief, are still small, but publishing as a whole is big business, dramatised by about two dozen mega-corporations, which describe themselves collectively as the “multi-media communications industry”. In some of these, the book is a junior partner alongside newspapers, magazines, radio and television. The growth of these corporations, mostly through mergers and acquisitions, is one of the factors which have made the public more conscious of the role of publishers in society and curious about “what publishers do”.

But the multi-mega phenomenon is effect, not cause. What has transformed publishing in the second half of the 20th century is the
information explosion, the development of technology to handle it and the consequent threat to the rights of authors and publishers. The ease of reprography first challenged and then threatened the principle of intellectual property. The computer’s ability to master and manipulate masses of data seemed to suggest that the primacy of print on paper as humanity’s vehicle of information was on the wane. By the 1990s, however, publishers, large and small, have adjusted to the information society. The computer has become a tool. The “new media”, as they were at first called—the database, the terminal, the compact disc—have progressively ceased to be seen as adversaries and have emerged as alternative forms of packaging, whether of information, entertainment or education.

Consequent on this explosion and revolution, what publishers do has become not only much more far-reaching, but also much more complex. Specialists of many kinds have become indispensable. In the days when print was the only vehicle, the author’s name and the publisher’s imprint on the title page were unquestioned evidence of their rights in what they had created, but what was once taken for granted has now to be fought for. Preoccupied with battles, increasingly successful, on behalf of their authors, against erosion of copyright, and absorbed in the competitive pressures of their business, publishers as a community have too often neglected the need to articulate their own creative role.

One of the reasons for this is that publishers are not homogeneous. They range not only from the very large to the very small, but from the serious to the frivolous, from those to
whom the maximisation of profit is paramount to those who seek no profit, from specialisations so precious that price is no object to mass markets where price is critical – and this spectrum is repeated in the major languages of the world. Yet publishers everywhere share one basic belief – that freedom to publish (defined by Samuel Israel, the Indian publisher, as “the principle that all of us should be free not only to express our views orally among our peers, but also to propagate them more widely, to broadcast them, to scatter them to the four winds”) is vital to human progress.

Although publishers all have the same purpose – to be the catalysts between author and reader – “the gatekeepers of knowledge” – they can never be a one-product industry. Books are not promoted generically because they meet a multitude of needs. Books are not a commodity. Every book is different from every other book. Publishers, therefore, can scarcely be blamed if their sense of community is not highly developed. They work well together where their rights or interests are threatened, but are generally concerned more with their individual images than with the image of publishing as a whole. Public interest is thus left free to settle on those aspects of publishing deemed newsworthy, and usually this means the adventures and misadventures of publishers and authors of popular fiction and non-fiction. Yet this is only one specialist group among many, each distinct from the others. The distance between a school book publisher and a scientific journal publisher is as great as that between a dentist and a lawyer. The distance between a music publisher and a publisher of legal databases is as great as that between an artist and an atomic scientist.
Not only do the constituencies that publishers serve vary widely, but also their ways of doing business. Some publishers depend on advertising revenue for some of their income. Others depend entirely on the cover prices. Some sell only through direct mail. Others sell only through bookstores. Some sell all over the world. Some sell only in one country, or even one town. What they are selling, which runs the gamut of human needs — education, news, enlightenment, self-improvement, information, culture, research, entertainment — affects the ways in which they link the author with the reader. In the process of linking, the publisher adds value, not as in the conversion of raw material into a usable artefact, but in his creative partnership with the author. Every book is unique, involving not only a close working relationship with its author, but a design of its own, its own manufacturing specifications, its own marketing plan, designed to reach, among millions of readers, the specific segment to whom it will appeal. There is no assembly line in publishing. Each book requires an expenditure of time, money, care and craftsmanship corresponding to the author’s effort and talent.

It is obviously impossible to describe this manifold business in any detail in a brief booklet. (One of the thousands of specialties in book publishing is books about publishing, of which hundreds have been written by practitioners, mostly for the benefit of their colleagues and successors.) Yet there are three vantage points from which even a casual observer can gain some insight into the world of publishing:
• through the functions of the people who work in publishing houses;
• through the formats they produce;
• through the principal categories into which publishers are grouped.

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THE PEOPLE

Even a one-person publishing house – and there are thousands of these – must offer the same basic services as a house with thousands of employees and dozens of departments. Most small publishers, and some not so small, manage the complexity of modern publishing by farming out specialist functions to freelance professionals, who form a vigorous and valuable part of the publishing community. Management of a publishing house calls for an exceptional range of inter-personal skills, because publishing is by definition people-intensive and involves diverse creative talents which have to be closely meshed, if the enterprise is to be successful.

The services a publishing house offers, no matter what its size or specialisation, fall into five groups:

Editorial – the search for authors, working with them and preparing manuscripts for publication.
Production – designing and supervising the conversion of manuscripts into marketable form.
Selling – promoting and marketing each title to its customers.
Distribution – storing, delivering, billing and collecting.
Finance & Accounting – computer systems, internal accounting, taxation, royalties, etc.

Some specific functions of a typical publishing house are:

1) Commissioning Editors (also called Acquisition Editors) are the publishers' representatives to the authors and their agents. Their professional lives involve constant searching and much travelling, seeking contact with the best minds in the world of ideas. They make proposals and receive proposals; they read manuscripts, analyse them, criticise them and add value through their skill and inventiveness. They present publishing proposals to their managements. They sign contracts with some authors (the first "moment of truth" in publishing); and diplomatically decline to sign with others. (Per Saugman, the Danish/British publisher wrote recently: "The publisher is just as responsible for preventing the writing of unwanted books as for facilitating the writing of needed books.")

2) Copy Editors work on completed manuscripts. They are concerned with the details of style, not only in the sense of literary expression, but to ensure that spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, mathematical conventions and so on follow approved practices. They are also concerned with accuracy. They look for wrong data, loose ends, discrepancies, omissions, contradictions, inaccurate allusions, etc. In many publishing houses, copy editors work at keyboards and are, in effect, composing type for the printer.

3) Designers and Illustrators are concerned with everything that contributes to a book's visual
impact. While the cover and jacket design are the most visible part of designers' work, they also specify typefaces; make layouts; unite artwork, illustrations and graphics effectively with the text. Value is often added to a book by creative illustrators, either working in-house or retained by publishers.

4) *Indexers and Translators:* Without indexes, many kinds of books are virtually useless. While some authors undertake their own indexing, there are many full-time professional indexers, mostly working as freelancers. An indexer needs the ability to analyse the text, devise suitable terms to express the concepts, and then to organize these terms alphabetically into a comprehensible system of heads and sub-heads.

Translators almost all work as freelancers. There is a substantial trade in the sale of language rights which depends entirely on the skills of those who have not only mastered more than one language, but are able to convey the style and message of the original with sensitivity and accuracy in another language.

5) *Production staff* work closely, often on-line, with printers to turn edited manuscripts into books. While in-house typesetting is increasingly common, few publishing houses have their own printing facilities. Production Managers and their staff transmit manuscripts along with finished artwork; obtain estimates; control costs; pass proofs back and forth among editors and authors. They are responsible for the scheduling of a book's manufacture (from almost overnight, if necessary, to many months); for the choice of paper, its weight, quality, texture, longevity. They place
orders with printers after the size of the print run (the second "moment of truth" in the publishing process) has been determined. They are responsible for a book’s tactile impact.

(In some companies, editors, designers and production managers and their staffs will be grouped under an executive who may be called the Publisher or the Publishing Director.)

6) Sales Managers will have obtained advance information on each new title from the editors, and in many houses will have been consulted on the earlier decisions to offer contracts to publish. Their job is to bring in orders, and as many as possible before publication dates. They work out sales targets and control selling expenses. Their responsibilities may be defined territorially or by product line. Larger companies will have sales managers concerned only with international sales and with exhibits at the 12 to 15 annual book fairs around the world, of which the Frankfurt Buchmesse is the largest and best-known.

7) Sales Representatives travel constantly, calling on bookstores, libraries, colleges, companies, government departments – wherever the possible result of a sales call will justify their time and expense. They attend book fairs and conventions. In bookstores, they check inventories and make presentations to bookstore buyers. They organise signing sessions for authors. They are the publishers’ front line in the marketplace.

8) Marketing Directors are concerned with pro-
motion material, publicity and advertising. They and their staffs devise imaginative strategies to sell each book as an individual title. The design, writing and production of leaflets, catalogues and brochures are handled in their departments. They maintain or obtain customer mailing lists appropriate to each book. If their companies’ products are sold by direct mail, they devise, authorise and measure each campaign. They send out review copies and monitor reviews. They issue press releases and handle public relations.

9) Rights Sales: The marketing of a book involves not only the sale of the copies in the warehouse, but the sale of subsidiary rights, eg serial rights in newspapers or magazines; film rights; reprint rights from a hardcover to a paperback house; regional rights to publishers in other countries; translation rights; book club rights; or rights to produce cheap reprints in countries where purchasing power is low. Increasingly, payments from Reproduction Rights Organisations, now established in twenty countries, are a significant part of authors’ and publishers’ income.

(Sales, marketing and rights staffs may, in larger houses, be grouped under a senior executive.)

10) Distribution: The third “moment of truth” in publishing is when books are ordered and leave the packing benches. The warehouse from which they travel may be part of the publishing house or one of the many distribution companies which serve the publishing industries of the world. Warehouses are the repositories of the back list, the accumulation
of each publisher's investment over many years. Warehouses also receive and process returns from bookstores, an expensive accommodation which most publishers afford to their trade customers.

11) *Customer Services:* This is where orders are received, where the invoices are prepared to trigger the despatch from the warehouse and where customers' queries are handled. Orders from the book trade in many countries are now delivered electronically and customer accounting is routinely computerised, either in the publisher's own warehouse or under contract to a service company, the latter being the normal choice of the small publisher and the automatic choice in countries where national wholesale distribution is centralised.

12) *Credit and Collections:* The fourth, and final, "moment of truth" in publishing is when the customer pays. In a business where inventory is held for years, the improvement of cash flow can be just as important as the generation of profit.

13) *Royalties:* Good relations with authors are publishers' major assets. The prompt and efficient disbursement of the author's share of each venture is a wise publisher's high priority and, in many companies, the greatest single expense. The sharing of subsidiary rights income and of fees from Reproduction Rights Organisations is a major component of royalty administration in the information age.

14) *Administration:* This comprises the functions common to any business enterprise—such as personnel, pensions, premises, budgeting, financial reporting, management
accounting, inventory records, etc. In large publishing companies, there are legal departments, mainly concerned with protecting contracts and the authors’ intellectual property. Unauthorised photocopying, piracy, plagiarism, libel, and censorship are all sadly prevalent in the information society.

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THE FORMATS
The principal format remains the book. About half a million new titles are published each year worldwide, most of them in the more developed countries. (According to Professor Shigeo Minowa of Kanagawa University, Japan, "the number of titles published and national income have a relationship of common sustained growth.") Among variations of the book format are:

* **Hardcover editions:** The conventional and traditional form, bound in boards, normally sewn at the spine, in which most fiction, non-fiction, textbooks and monographs are first published.

* **Softcover editions:** Either mass market paperbacks, comprising reprints of popular literature priced to achieve maximum sales, or quality ("trade") paperbacks, in which many original works are published.

* **Illustrated and art books:** When illustrations, whether from photographs, paintings or drawings, predominate over the text, large format and coated paper are used to do justice to the artists’ work. Picture research and the matching of text and illustrations
are significant elements of value added by the publishers.

*Journals:* Published monthly or quarterly, subscription-based journals are an important segment of the scholarly and scientific sectors of the book industry.

*Looseleaf publications:* Widely used by legal and professional publishers for information which needs regular updating.

*Newsletters and specialist newspapers:* Used for fast-moving, ephemeral information.

*Educational materials:* Charts, wall maps, workbooks and teachers' guides are among formats used by school publishers in support of the textbooks they publish.

Non-print media are used by publishers either to supplement or replace print, or to offer information in alternative forms to suit each reader's ('"end-user's'') wishes and tastes. These media are distinguished from the book by being non-tactile. (Elia Kazan, the film producer, on publishing his first book at the age of 55, exclaimed: "A book! A book! I can hold it in my hands.") Communicating with the eye or ear by mechanical or electronic means, these formats give the users flexibility and freedom to select, search and, increasingly, to interact, ie interrogate databases or add their own input. Often using personal computers, users can access networks and information systems which comprise the equivalents of thousands of books and journals. They enable authors, publishers and readers to handle masses of information with speed and economy, for which print on paper is inadequate. Formats include:
Audio-cassettes: The spoken word, widely used for language teaching, and increasingly popular for those who like to "read" aurally. Combined with film slides, audio cassettes have many instructional uses.

Video-cassettes: Although most commonly used for time-shifting of television programmes, or home entertainment, video-cassettes are increasingly used as part of instructional packages for schools, business and industry.

Microform and microfile: Used to condense masses of archival information into a small compass for rapid reference.

On-line databases: Accessed through computer terminals and 'phone systems, these comprise either full-text, with word-searching, or abstracts to lead researchers to required references stored in central information systems.

Compact discs: Increasingly used as alternative forms of reference libraries, using sound and graphics, as well as text. Large compilations of tabulated information, such as bibliographic databases, dictionaries or encyclopedias, which require to be updated periodically, lend themselves to transmission in CD form. Users have their own CD players and receive updated discs as information changes. The CD is the basis of the hand-held "electronic book".

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THE CATEGORIES
Growth has engendered specialisation in publishing. Many companies concentrate
entirely on one market, such as romantic fiction or medicine or religious literature. Large companies are organised into market-defined divisions or departments. While the people working in publishing, and the functions they perform, remain constant, the methodology of publishing is endlessly innovative, ranging from tabulation and compilation of data (for which there is no individual author) to complete in-house preparation (when the editor acts as author) to books evolved by long and exhaustive dialogue between editors and authors. Some of the major categories are:

**Scholarly publishing:** Extensively the preserve of university presses and professional societies, scholarly publishing is characterised by a highly specialised market, low print runs and correspondingly high prices. Whether commercial or non-profit, scholarly publishers have to work closely with the disciplines they serve. This is done by using consultant editors, advisory boards and expert readers. Dealing largely with treatises, conference papers and research findings, scholarly publications are sold mainly to the library markets. Journals are as important as books in this field. (According to Professor Murray Goodman of the University of California, outstanding chemist and editor of a leading polymer science journal, "Science is not science until it is published.")

**Professional publishing:** Professional books are tools that professional people use in the course of their work. The law and medicine are the best-known professions, but they are only two of many, large and small, some
of which have publishing houses totally devoted to their needs. Professional publishers include specialists in subjects such as accounting, archaeology, architecture, dentistry, management or photography. Each specific field of business, industry or research has its own professional literature, of which the publishers, often professionally qualified in the disciplines they serve, are an integral part. Standard reference works, often multi-volume, written by many authors, are a major feature of professional publishing, whose productions have been among the first to use databases to amplify their printed products. High standards of accuracy and authority are essential in this branch of publishing. So is constant updating and speed of revision, often met by the use of looseleaf services or annual supplements. The professional market is not price-sensitive, but is demanding and unforgiving.

*Student textbooks:* The publishing of textbooks for class adoption or recommendation in colleges or universities requires close collaboration with the lecturers and professors, who are the arbiters of acceptance and from whose ranks the authors are drawn. Editors of college textbook houses spend much time on campuses seeking advice and potential authors. Authors are often good teachers who love their subjects and wish to inspire students to a similar devotion by teaching in new and better ways. Undergraduate textbooks are often at the core of packages which include tests, solution manuals, study guides, workbooks and computer software, as well as manuals for the teachers. While the cate-
gory as a whole caters for a full range of courses in the social sciences, the humanities, the sciences, engineering, business and administration, most textbook publishers are specialists. Mathematics and statistics; philosophy and psychology; computer science and accounting; geography and geology; chemistry and physics; economics and business administration – these are the sorts of subjects in which college publishers seek to build lists and reputations. Marketing techniques include the use of college travellers and hundreds of desk copies sent to teachers in the hope that they will recommend class adoption. Beset by secondhand selling and photocopying, some textbook publishers now offer “customised” textbooks, compiled from central databases to the specifications of individual teachers.

(Student textbook, scholarly and professional publishers, serving higher education, postgraduate study, research and practice in a multitude of disciplines, are highly compatible with one another. Together they link innovators with implementers, scholars with students, teachers with pupils, researchers with technicians. They reflect changes in the traditional disciplines and embody the literature of new disciplines. They safeguard quality through “refereeing”, the careful evaluation of manuscripts by expert readers. They have a transnational appeal, since the disciplines they serve know no boundaries. They have responded to the challenge of the information society by embracing the electronic modes and at the same time sustaining the growth of folio publishing. Most of them are members of the International Group of
Scientific, Technical and Medical Publishers (STM), an affiliate of the International Publishers Association (IPA), with members in forty-eight countries.

Publishing for schools: Since educational materials reflect national educational systems, this is the least international sector of publishing. Authors, who are almost invariably teachers, work in close partnership with editors and designers. Books have to be constructed to fit curricula, and are often conceived and developed by publishers, working with educational authorities and parent/teacher groups, before authors are approached. School publishers sometimes affect the development of curricula and teaching methods by what they publish. They are major producers of materials to complement textbooks, such as charts, models, slides, wall maps, workbooks, teachers' manuals, videotapes and computer programmes. (Peter Drucker, American management guru, says that "just as the printed book totally changed the curriculum of the schools, so did the computer and tape recorder and video.")

Catering for the education of the children of the world from kindergarten through high school, school publishers, many of whom themselves have teaching experience, are part of each country’s educational framework.

Children's books: Along with school books, this category is at the critical heartland of what publishing is about. For toddlers, pre-teens, sub-teens, teenagers and young adults, books are part of the preparation for life. Competing vigorously and successfully
with television, children’s books involve a skilled partnership between words and pictures. Starting with durable (sometimes washable) first books for babies, children’s books come in many shapes and sizes. Schools, libraries and parents, in addition to the children themselves, constitute a critical and powerful market, reached not only through bookstores, but through toyshops, supermarkets and novelty stores. Packagers (companies offering finished books to publishers) are especially active in children’s books. Co-production of children’s books in different languages, using the same illustrations, is quite common. The language of childhood is universal. Children’s book publishers meet each year at their own international book fair in Bologna. Comic and fantasy books are significant sub-sectors of this category. Few functions of the book are more seminal than inculcating the reading habit among young people. Books are also vital tools in combating functional illiteracy in the developed world and, when designed and produced by publishers in developing countries, in setting children on the road to literacy where schooling is inadequate. While some children’s authors have become big names, many successful children’s books are written, designed and illustrated entirely in-house. Children’s books illustrate, more clearly than any other genre, that books are vehicles for ideas, not ends in themselves.

Fiction and non-fiction (also known as “adult hardcover”) are the most prominent category in the public eye. Also called “trade” books, they depend heavily on sales through bookstores, in which publishers compete
for shelf space. Book clubs are an effective marketing offshoot of trade publishing. Novels, biographies and autobiographies are major components. Specialisms in non-fiction are almost endless. Sports, travel, theatre, politics, warfare, music, art, health, gardening, cookery, religion, history, poetry are among hundreds of constituencies served by their own sectors of publishing. Trade publishers are the apostles of each country's culture. (Per Gedin, the Swedish publisher, says that: "the indigenous publisher, and no one else, will invest in the writing of his country which eventually will result in a national literature as important for his country as for the rest of the world.") Trade publishing is a volatile, high-risk market, unpredictable and subject to the public's whims and fancies. A few core successes are essential to each publisher's survival. Established authors can demand and receive large sums as advances against royalties. Subsidiary rights - paperback, serial, film and book club - can be crucial to a book's success. In this category of publishing, intuition is often as important as judgment, and there are plenty of surprises, good and bad. "Hyped" (heavily advertised) books sometimes do not respond to the enormous sums of money spent. Books published with modest expectations may be favourably reviewed and rushed into reprints. Literary prizes bring substantial additional money to some authors and boost sales for their publishers. With authors who are often distinguished and famous, publishers of trade books now and then find themselves in the limelight.

*Mass-market paperbacks*: These are mostly
reprints licensed from hard-cover publishers. Often the guarantees of the paperback publishers enable the hardcover publishers to capture title contracts. A relatively small number of paperback houses serve this enormous market, with editions running into hundreds of thousands of copies. The books, regarded as expendable, are merchandised through every possible retail outlet. Romantic fiction, westerns and thrillers appear mainly in paperback editions. Some hardcover publishers have their own paperback imprints, and some paperback publishers publish original titles in hardcover. This phenomenon is called "vertical integration".

*Information and reference publishing*: Dictionaries and encyclopedias are the best-known products in this category of publishing, which makes more extensive use of computers and databases than any other, in order to keep pace with the constantly expanding and changing volume of raw information. Specialised dictionaries serve many subjects in science and technology. Bilingual and multi-lingual dictionaries cross the language barriers. Some encyclopedias and hardbacks are available in database form on compact discs, as are the established national and international bibliographies. Those who compile reference works are generally employed full-time by publishing houses. The same applies to directories, atlases and maps. The skills of the publisher, who is most often the originator in all of these, are in the assembly, organisation, classification, constant updating, packaging and design of materials which are often in the public
domain. By transforming the data into saleable packages, publishers add value and establish the value of the copyright.

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The role of the publisher has been compared with various other human functions, not always to its credit. Midwives, middlemen, gamblers are among favourite metaphors. One of the most graphic comparisons is with the orchestral conductor. Composers compose; musicians play; but until the conductor raises his baton, there is no performance, no joining of the artists with the listening audience. Like conducting, publishing is not only an aggregate of creative skills, judgment and knowledge, but also requires exceptional response to the creativity of those whose works are being performed. Just as conductors represent composers, so publishers must understand and empathise with authors and must understand the often painful effort involved in writing and the profound satisfaction that crowns its completion. They must also be sensitive to the tastes and needs of their audience.

Through all the warp and woof of publishing—all the formats and all the functions that people in publishing houses fulfil, as varied and kaleidoscopic as the span of human activities they record—there runs a constant thread: the mission to enlighten or inform or entertain those who read the words that publishers deliver. Older than printing, older even than paper, the act of publishing will subsist in a world in which communication becomes increasingly complex, congested and critical. And in that larger section of humanity for whom economic progress lies still in an
uncertain future, publishing will fulfil the role that it has in the past of both reflecting and helping to shape human progress.

Peter Weidhaas, Director of the Frankfurt Book Fair, said in a speech in Guadalajara, Mexico: "There is a direct relation between the overall development and productivity of a nation and the percentage of that development and productivity contributed by publishing and the book trade." There is equally a connection between democratic freedom and having a vigorous publishing industry; a truism exemplified by the underground publishers of the ex-communist countries or the anti-apartheid publishers of South Africa.

Publishing can never function alone. It is essentially catalytic. It works only in partnership with authors, printers, booksellers and librarians, all of whom are just as subject as publishers to the disturbing pressures of our information-glutted technology-led phase in history. Relying for survival on intellectual property rights, the world book community has common goals – to demonstrate that copyright is a liberator, not an inhibitor; to use technical innovation wisely and economically; and to devise ways of reaching the millions whose access to literature is blocked by poverty. "The greatest challenge facing us now," says Vartan Gregorian, Director of the New York Public Library from 1981 to 1989, "is how to transform information into structured knowledge." From such knowledge comes better understanding of our complex and troubling age. In whatever format, in whatever political system, in whatever branch of human activity, that is the task to which publishers make, and will continue to make, a creative contribution.

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