The Problem of Publishing

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I. Publishing theory?

Particle physics might require a unified field theory. But publishing? Commentator and consultant Brian O’Leary suggested as much in a talk at the Books in Browsers conference: ‘a unified field theory of publishing,’ a Grand Theory for the operations of publishing to rank with the most complex and rarefied of disciplines. Theories are suggested explanations of the world describing how apparent anomalies, contradictions, and questions are resolved, and ultimately are testable against that world for their validity. Presupposed is the concept that something needs explanation in the first place and, as a profession, in some senses analogous to plumbing or teaching, or an industry, analogous say to the motor or hair maintenance industry, publishing does not seem to require a theory or an explanation as such, most industries or trades being more or less self-explanatory. No one is proffering unified field theories of hair maintenance—at least, not to this author’s knowledge. Why would anyone suggest such a project for publishing?

Publishing has a long history of being problematic, always caught between the Janus-faced imperatives of symbolic worth and economic expediency. O’Leary is constructing his theory not in response to this old dilemma, but rather to a new one: that is, the rise in digital technology and its impact on the methods and models used by publishers. He sets out to critique the ‘container model of publishing’, whereby publishers fill ‘containers’, or books, with content, then sell them. In digital settings, this model fails because traditional bounded containers do not obtain the freely moving
world of browsers and code; we need to start instead with content, and the context, not the container. Put simply, O’Leary’s field theory suggests that, with the advent of digital, what was a container industry should become a context industry.

This is a good theory. Yet it begs a question: does publishing only need a theory in the post-digital era? And what is more, is it really a theory in the first place? A theory of publishing has to explain what publishing does in the digital age; O’Leary explains what it should do, or could do, and outlines a strategy, but it also needs to ask if the container model does fully explain publishing before digital. In fact, far from digital being the beginning of the problem of publishing, this has always been the case; prior to digital, publishing still needed a theory.

People expect their day-to-day activities to make sense, even if some philosophers might think otherwise. By tracing each of these strands, we can start to see that a unified field theory of publishing is not a strange and unwieldy imposition, but an intellectual necessity for a vital area of cultural and intellectual life.

II. The word itself

The first thing to note about the English word ‘publish’ is that it predates the invention of the printing press by at least 70 years, and more when the delay in reaching England is taken into account. Its earliest use in the Oxford English Dictionary is 1382 from the Wycliffite Bible: ‘It is yherd and with solempne word puplyschid in the halle of the kyng’. Immediately we are alerted to an important facet of the word. Connection to books and cultural products in general have historically been less important than the wider sense of to make public, to declare, or to announce something—a use more about sending a message than pertaining to books or industry. Another example in the OED is from Lytton Strachey’s book Queen Victoria (1921): ‘For the Queen, far from making a secret of her affectionate friendship, took care to publish it to the world’. This refers to publishing as a direct act or emotional state—there is no sense of an intermediary, a third object. Queen Victoria would not be a publisher in any colloquial use of the term, despite its flexibility.

Most early uses were simply about things not being concealed; an element or lineage in which publishing is hardly a positive act so much as an absence of mind. Stemming from Anglo-Norman puplier and Middle French publier, which loosely meant to make public, or known, or to announce or to proclaim, itself tracing back to the Latin puplicare, meaning to make public property, or place at the disposal of the community, the word’s history is European, imbricated in the public life of the Continent. In post-Classical Latin, it also meant to denounce, and had a meaning ‘to confiscate’. Some divergent understandings and histories are at play here, all far from the narrow meaning of book publishing.

Another significant publishing thread is institutional, typically relating to ecclesiastical, legal, or political bodies (the Church, the Law, and the State). Thus one would publish a will, a libel, wedding banns, or monarchical edicts, the manner of which has changed little over the centuries. Compare Shakespeare’s will as recorded in 1616: ‘And doe Revoke All former wills & publiche this to be my last will & testament’ to that of Robert Maxwell, in the Financial Times in 1992: ‘I, Robert Maxwell, residing at Headington Hill Hall, Oxford, England, do hereby make, publish, and declare this codicil to my last will and testament’. Both wills here invoke publishing in a purely institutional way, outside of which the usage has no bearing—that is to say, the institutional structure itself presupposes publishing, contains the publishing. Publishing is an action only in the broader context of the tradition, and so can be seen in terms of a service or function within it.

Only at the third level do we come to an industry understanding of the term publishing, defined by the OED as ‘To prepare and issue copies of (a book, newspaper, piece of music, etc.) for distribution or sale to the public. Also: to prepare and issue the work of (an author). This leaves open interesting tensions: for example, ontologically between issuing music and books, and also procedurally—what does issuing copies involve at a granular and material level? The inclusion of author, bracketed, is also instructive, implying acts of publishing are fundamentally distinct from those of authorship, or creation, even as the authorship connection ties us into ideas of individuality and textuality. This differentiation is alive in a recognizably modern form in Thomas More’s Dialogues Heresyes (1529), only just beyond the incunabula phase of the printed word: