Reviews

The Everything Store: Jeff Bezos and the age of Amazon
Brad Stone
384 pp., hb
Price £18.99

Whether you will like Brad Stone’s book about Jeff Bezos and the rise of Amazon probably depends on your personal angle on the book industry. You may be delighted by the tale of a young, bright, and tremendously ambitious—even ruthless—Wall Street banker if you hold an MBA yourself and live on the West Coast of the United States, somewhere between Seattle and Santa Barbara (well north of the glitz of Hollywood). This delimitation is not based on an argument related to culture, but to a specific view of efficiency. Amazon is a company based on the appraisal of not just the customer—which is its official credo—but also the perfection of getting a job done without loss of efficiency from any friction. You may have a different take if you live on the East Coast of the US, in Europe, or anywhere else on the planet, affiliated to a profession in the liberal arts, or in science, or if you are interested in the broader context of culture, media, and society.

One of Amazon’s many paradoxical characteristics is to be aggressively consumer driven, and yet dedicated to reducing communication to a minimum. Communication is seen as just a deviation from getting a job done. ‘We should be trying to figure out a way for teams to communicate less with each other, not more,’ reads one of the most beautiful quotes from Jeff Bezos in this book (p. 167). This attitude is reflected, on the one hand, in Amazon’s preference to replace any returned product for free, if a customer is not satisfied, rather than engage in a conversation with that customer. On the other hand, the same approach can drive industry observers, critics, and competitors crazy, since Amazon will rarely discuss its business practices or strategies, when not urged to do so in court, or share detailed information about its business which would allow anyone external to gain a more than hypothetical understanding of the driving forces within it. Even Chris Anderson’s seminal essay (2004) and subsequent book (2006) on the ‘Long Tail’ sales curve at Amazon were not based on any detailed sales data provided by Amazon, I was told by a senior Amazon executive some years ago. Nevertheless, other distributors of content anecdotally acknowledged that the Long Tail paradigm was consistent with their data. We are fortunate, therefore, that Brad Stone has accomplished a great reportage by collecting minute details, plausible quotes, and rich first-hand evidence from a variety of sources plus interviews with both Jeff Bezos and key employees.

Amazon has expanded from selling books to other products, like media content and groceries, and in so doing has turned itself
from a retailer to a leading technology company, earning significant income from data storage services. And even when it generated global media hype with the demonstration of a drone delivering a package with a few books to some suburban dwelling, it was not clear if this was simply a genial PR stunt or an early glimpse into the future of delivery. Amazon’s efficiency, though, is radically different from Apple’s perfectionism. Stone is good at showing how this company pushes for innovation incrementally, by improvising along the path, with only rare moments the one bold idea setting the grand design. Such guiding moments certainly include the initial intuition of Jeff Bezos in the mid-1990s about books as the perfect item to be distributed with the help of the internet, and the introduction of the Kindle in 2007. Rightly, Stone juxtaposes Steve Jobs and Jeff Bezos as the succession of the visionary inventor by the pragmatic business tycoon.

Brad Stone’s analysis fails where he ought to step back and take a look at the broader picture, of how, and why, Amazon could change ‘the book’ as ‘the last bastion of analog’ (Jeff Bezos on the day of the introduction of the Kindle, p. 253). Stone is not even very interested in ‘the book’ in the first place. Nor does he spend a lot of time wondering why Amazon is so hated today in some parts of the world, or why, even in the US (well, on the East Coast), so many controversies have sprung up recently about what the digitization of books could mean, not just in a business perspective, but more generally.

The current ebook revolution, triggered only seven years ago by the launch of the Kindle, and Amazon’s wildly successful, yet far from automatic, success in convincing publishers to make their books available in digital formats can be reasonably attributed to the choices and doings of one man, Jeff Bezos. But, as Bezos himself well understands, if he had not done what he did, someone else most likely would have done it, albeit in different ways.

If we consider a book as a hugely successful format that allows an author to wrap any tale, be it fiction or nonfiction, on any subject, into a form that is well appreciated by readers, we start to understand why so many might be concerned when the ecosystem in which authors, books, and readers coexist is turned upside down. Amazon is turning this system upside down by taking on, besides selling books, all other roles along the value chain, through becoming a publisher, a full service provider to authors, an organizer of reading communities, and both the single most important sales channel for traditional publishers, and their fiercest competitor.

In a piece in the New Yorker, George Packer (2014) explored the ecosystem of the book, and who worries about its future, and why and how. In this essay, Amazon is put centre stage, but framed in the broader context of culture and reading. Packer discusses how the Amazon approach is that of a facilitator, opening access to reading, and to publishing to not just the cultured classes, while at the same time disrupting the sector with no second thought. Packer concludes,

Bezos is right: gatekeepers are inherently elitist, and some of them have been weakened, in no small part, because of their complacency and short-term thinking. But gatekeepers are also barriers against the complete commercialization of ideas, allowing new talent the time to develop and learn to tell difficult truths. When the last gatekeeper but one is gone, will Amazon care whether a book is any good?

There is yet another fundamental factor that, in my mind, ought to be central for any conclusive analysis yet which is missing in Stone’s book and in all of the North American part of the debate: what about the international, if not global, dimension of Amazon? Today, Amazon is seen as the global conqueror of the book planet. From early, relatively cautious, yet wildly successful inroads into Germany and the United Kingdom in the late 1990s, Amazon today has a significant role not just in Western Europe, with localized online stores and communities in Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and the UK, but also in Japan and South Korea and in many of the more important emerging economies, notably Brazil, China, India, but an unclear status in Russia (where Amazon has had a local executive since 2013 yet not launched any business so far). However, as important as these markets in the Old World may be within the traditional field of books and reading, the real world of the early 21st century is much bigger, and more complicated.