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Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Henrickson, L (2022) Book Wars: The Digital Revolution in Publishing by John B. Thompson. *Information & Culture*, 57 (2). pp. 220-221. ISSN: 2164-8034

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Book Wars: The Digital Revolution in Publishing

by John B. Thompson

Polity Press, 2021. 511 pp.

Hardcover, £30

ISBN: 9781509546787

“What’s that you’re reading?” my server asked as she placed my drink down. I had an hour before the next train and a review deadline to meet, so I chose to sit and read in a local pub. Holding up the book so she could see its front cover, I explained to the server that I was reading about how digital technologies are changing the state of publishing. “Oh,” she exclaimed. “I wouldn’t give my Kindle up for the world. Have you read Martha Wells’ *All Systems Red*?” The next hour was filled with lively conversation about ebooks, self-publishing, and tablet-based children’s books, with my book sitting between us, unread.

This book was John B. Thompson’s *Book Wars: The Digital Revolution in Publishing*, which I carried with me to read in spare moments. *Book Wars*, it should be noted, is not light reading, literally or figuratively. At 511 pages and 930 grams, the book asserted itself wherever I pulled it from my bag. This meant that, despite my intentions to read, I was often lured into chats with strangers first asking what I was reading and, following my reply, then sharing their opinions about their own digital book buying and reading experiences. These readers tended towards excitement about easier access to a wider range of material, and some had even self-published their own novels or audiobooks. Yet they knew little about how these new publishing opportunities had emerged, or what they thought would happen next.

Thompson prefaces *Book Wars* with provocation. “So what happens when the oldest of our media industries collides with the great technological revolution of our time?” he asks. “What happens when a media industry that has been with us for more than 500 years and is deeply embedded in our history and culture finds itself confronted by, and threatened by, a new set of technologies that are radically different from those that have underpinned its practices and business models for centuries?” (vi-vii) These are the questions driving *Book Wars*, which documents research about Anglo-American trade publishing conducted between 2013 and 2019. This research includes critical consideration of (sometimes anonymized) publisher documentation and reader response, around 180 interviews with staff from across a

variety of (again, sometimes anonymized) publishing organizations, and reference to previous interviews conducted for Thompson's 2010 *Merchants of Culture* (Polity). Thompson provides a more detailed "Note on Research Methods" in Appendix 2, in which he reflects upon his privileged network of key sources and his own assumptions about his approaches to research.

Thompson observes throughout *Book Wars* that a primary result of ever-increasing digitality is publishers' increased attention to their ultimate audiences: readers. Through such means as the accumulation of "information capital" (data that may be used as sources of power to achieve specific aims), the personalization of online experience, and the rise of do-it-yourself culture, our traditional circuits of book production and distribution are challenged. Publishers are no longer dependent upon retailers to mediate book sales; new book formats and forms have emerged; business models are being overhauled in light of digital accessibility and unsteady interpretations of textual ownership. These changes follow three major developments that shaped twentieth-century publishing: the rise of bookstores, changing cultures of agenting, and the commercial growth and conglomeration of publishers.

In addition to its introduction and conclusion, *Book Wars* comprises 12 chapters. Most chapters elaborate upon particular book formats and their respective commercial structures: ebooks (Chapters 1, 2, 3, 5 and 9), audiobooks (Chapter 10), and digital serials (Chapter 11). Other chapters discuss institutionalized structures of authorship and publishing (Chapters 7 and 8). Thompson also considers how digital contexts prompt legal disputes (Chapter 4) and introduce new means of (e)book visibility and discoverability (Chapter 6). In the last chapter (Chapter 12), he summarizes the preceding chapters, partly by delineating new publishing models, while emphasising the social and commercial power of digital data. In all chapters, Thompson attends to the evolution of both hardware and software, situating developments within their respective social contexts. He maintains a critical eye towards technological determinism, always returning to the motivations of the people behind the screens. One of the most noteworthy trends amongst surveyed publishing professionals is that, prior to their involvement in publishing, many of them have little or no background in publishing industries. Indeed, if we are truly in the midst of any kind of book war, many battles are being fought by civilians.

Thompson's *Book Wars* offers both historical overviews and current snapshots of digital publishing initiatives, and its chapters – while varying greatly in length – would be

valuable additions to undergraduate and postgraduate reading lists alike. The figures of publishing models in Chapter 12, “Old Media, New Media”, are somewhat superfluous, but could be useful in pedagogical contexts; Thompson himself acknowledges the limitations of these models. This reader’s only true frustration, though, related to particular footnotes that were either distractingly long or lacking in detail (e.g. web links being presented without accommodating information). Thompson’s sole reference to the current COVID-19 pandemic – which will undoubtedly have longstanding effects on the publishing industry – appears in a fleeting footnote, perhaps added in post-proofing haste.

Nevertheless, *Book Wars* presents a comprehensive and compelling narrative of new forms of book production, publication, and dissemination. Anyone considering the current and historical states of Anglo-American trade publishing would benefit from reading this impressive piece of scholarship – in physical *or* digital form.

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