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The Consequences of the Digital Revolution

It is now more than thirteen years since the Amazon kindle first launched in 2007. According to the Association of American Publishers, the total reported sales of e-books in 2019 was more than 335 million (Watson).In 2010, an estimate of only 69 million e-books were sold. This incredible growth of the e-book market raises important questions and concerns about not only the future of book publishing and reading, but also the effects this growth has had on the present book publishing industry. We must consider the consequences of such a disruption in the industry, which, some would say, affects the quality of newly published works and may diminish equal access to information for vulnerable communities. University of Puerto Rico professor Leonardo Flores asks, "What is the future of literature in a world in which every generation increasingly reads and writes on computer screens rather than on paper? How does our writing change when composed and published directly in digital spaces?” (qt. in Herther).

Even voices such as Anthony Daniels, the actor behind the Star Wars character C-3PO, have come forth to discuss the consequences of the predicted decline of the print book. In his essay, “The Digital Challenge: I Loss & Gain, or the Fate of the Book,” Daniels expresses his fears about the cultural and intellectual decline that could result from an increasingly digital world. He writes passionately about his relationship to books and his experiences in brick-and-mortar bookstores, dismayed by the decline of independent bookstores and libraries alike. Daniels writes,

Whether the book survives or not, I am firmly of the opinion that it ought to survive…For me, to browse in a bookshop, especially a second-hand one, will forever be superior to browsing on the internet precisely because chance plays a much larger part in it…The imagination is stimulated in a way that the more logical connections of the Internet cannot match; the Internet will make people literal-minded.

Daniels is especially concerned about the disappearance of browsing culture, those who go to bookstores to find treasures of which they were previously unaware. He fears the loss of imagination, and even more so, the loss of intellectual creativity. He seems to suggest that the problem stems from a society that is increasingly concerned with convenience and cost-effectiveness over the preservation of culture and art. He mentions a compelling concern: “A library is no longer a repository of all that has been thought or written but a department store where the readers determine by their borrowing habits what stock should be held.”

Daniels is not alone in these concerns, especially as they pertain to libraries and access to information. Louise Pisano Simone of Georgetown University writes about the threat that digitalization threatens the open exchange of information. Simone sees particular concern in the changes libraries have undergone since the beginning of the digital revolution: “While the print book does not seem to be disappearing as quickly as predicted,” she writes, “increasingly libraries are replacing outdated books with updated digital versions and purchasing online journals instead of paper copies” (75). This is a problem especially in communities most dependent on libraries for the exchange of information. In lower-income communities, she notes, libraries serve as a free source of information, and many in those regions don’t have the same access to the technology needed to view digital sources as readily as those in higher-income communities. Additionally, Simone discusses the concerning restrictions being placed on libraries by publishing companies. In February of 2011, publishing giant Harper Collins announced that it “would institute a 26-loan-cap per library on the e-books it publishes” (Simone 69). Libraries play a key role in “bridging the gap that divides those who have access to technology and thus information, and those who don’t” (Simone 74). When restrictions are thus placed on libraries in this way, it is potentially detrimental to those communities that need access the most.

As books and journals are increasingly moving to digital publication without print copies available, it is important to consider who would be affected the most, both in benefit and hindrance. Simone argues that “publishers and booksellers have gained control of not just econtent but the *access* to it as well. By limiting access to econtent, they are unilaterally altering a fundamental principle of free and open access to information” (75). Further, she argues that these restrictions on access to information threaten the basis of our democracy, and this be remedied to defend public interest: to preserve free and open access to information.

And yet some welcome the new age of digitalization. Unlike Daniels, who fears the loss of imagination and creativity that he believes could stem from the loss of print books, Jeffrey R. Di Leo, in his essay “The Cult of the Book—and Why it Must End,” argues that the existing academic that so values print books is no longer tenable and needs to face the reality of the new digital age. He takes an economic stance: “In short, digital books are more affordable, accessible, and environmentally friendly” (Di Leo). If this is true, why, he questions, do so many discriminate against digital content by demanding that it be available also in print? Di Leo blames the ideology of academe. “They believe that the comfortable manner in which readers approach a paper-and-ink object is fundamentally different from the attitude they bring to a digital copy” (Di Leo). Di Leo expresses optimism about the future of e-books, arguing that there will come a time when new literature will emerge that is only possible in digital formats, ones that incorporate multi-media content. While we have not yet seen this change in a significant way, Di Leo seems to suggest that we first “need to change—to resignify—the semiotics of academic culture.” The idea, the image, of the book as a “printed artifact” is no more or less natural than its “digital counterpart” (Di Leo). Until this happens, until the ideology behind this belief changes, academe won’t reach its full potential—its destiny, as Di Leo wrote—in the digital world. Some, however, see significant problems in how the publishing industry has adapted to the digital revolution.

Steve Wasserman’s article “The Amazon Effect” analyzes the history of the digital revolution and the rise of e-books, particularly in the context of the rise of Amazon, which is still one of the largest booksellers today. This article was published in 2012, so while most of its content is focused on historical events and statistics, it is worthwhile to note that it doesn’t include data from more recent years. It is still useful, however, in looking at the early growth of digitalization and the consequences of Amazon’s predatory business practices on the book industry as a whole. Like Simone’s paper discusses, Wasserman also expresses concern over how publishers are restricting access to e-books for libraries. Major publishing company Random House, he mentioned, began charging libraries three times the retail price for e-books and, according to a *New York Times* article cited in the paper, “five of the six major publishers either refuse to make new e-books available to libraries or have pulled back significantly over the last year on how easily or how often those books can be circulated” (qt. in Wasserman 21). He argued that Amazon could have generated good for society, like increasing literacy rates and improved access to “alternative literatures” (21). Instead, however, they have created a precedent in the book industry that focuses on profit alone over the public good. Amazon’s predatory business practices have left other players in the industry with little other choice but to “play hardball” to stay afloat, and e-books offer them with the perfect opportunity to do just that. When the Independent Publishers Group, a distributor of about 500 small publishers, for example, refused to accept Amazon’s demand for deeper discounts, Amazon responded by pulling “nearly 5,000 digital titles” (20). Additionally, Amazon, Wasserman explained, is willing to sell e-books at a loss to attract customers into the “leviathan’s cornucopia of online goods and services” (15); because they are not fully dependent on e-book (or even print book) sales, they can instead use under-market prices to undercut competitors and nonetheless make a net profit. “There was a time not so long ago,” Wasserman wrote, “when ‘competition’ was a healthy thing, not a synonym for corporate ‘murder’” (21).

Yet digitalization (and even Amazon, in a sense) has created opportunities for indie authors as well. With the rise of e-books comes the rise of e-publishing, a sector of publishing that releases books, essays, and other products exclusively in the e-book format. This has allowed indie publishers to grow and foster the growth of self-publishing, allowing ever more works of writing to reach readers. This change is largely due to Amazon’s Kindle Single program, which offers writers the chance to “publish original e-book essays of no more than 30,000 words” (Wasserman 20). According to Wasserman, “authors agree to a bargain-basement price of no more than $2.99 in exchange for 70 percent royalty and no advance” (20). This program allows authors to check their sales anytime, which he said was a level of transparency almost unknown before that point in traditional publishers and magazines (20). While this may seem like a great opportunity for writers who wish to self-publish (despite the lack of advance and low sell prices), Smashwords' founder, Mark Coker, in his 2018 ebook predictions, explained that this hints at a dark future where one marketplace, Amazon, “holds all the readers captive” and “these indies have lost their independence because if they jump away from that dominant marketplace, there might be nothing there to jump to” (qt. in Herther).

The digital revolution has created indirect challenges as well. In Kim Wilkins’ article, “Writing Resilience in the Digital Age,” she writes about new challenges writers face with the rise of the internet and social media culture. Increasingly, publishers, Wilkins said, expect writers to build an “author platform” on social media, which is used to build a reputation as a writer and promote their material before publication. “Book sales are increasingly dependent on a reciprocal flow of communication between writers and readers,” she wrote (Wilkins). The normalization of these practices has lead to unique challenges that writers must face, especially as a distraction from their main projects. Many bad habits, such as surfing the internet instead of working on a project, Wilkins argues, “arise out of an increasing insistence that writers develop a digital authorial identity or ‘platform.’” The tools used to develop these online platforms can lead to anxiety and stasis, the enemies of what Wilkins calls “resilient writing.” Wilkins writes about her own experiences creating this ‘authorial platform,’ in which she wrote nearly 18,000 words of marketing material, equivalent to roughly a month’s work of fiction writing; but this promotional material only exists to promote the novel, not to add to the word count of the next one. “Moreover,” Wilkins wrote, “as a recent article by Ewan Morrison in *The Guardian* showed, authors needed to spend 80% of their social media writing on topics unrelated to selling their work in order to keep their followers on-side.” This time devoted to developing authorial platforms takes time away from the writer’s primary business. As a result, “writing projects languish or are given insufficient attention” (Wilkins). Wilkins also argues that in the process of forming these platforms that give them a direct line of communication with their readers, the kind of instant feedback they receive affects their habits greatly; when authors write blogs, for example, instant gratification from feedback can be addicting, and those sort of activities must seem easier in comparison to writing “saleable works” (Wilkins). The writer’s “writing resilience,” then, is compromised. Further, Wilkins notes:

The kind of writing acceptable for social media posting is rooted in the familiar: personal observations, opinions, and events. Creative writing is by its nature original and unfamiliar until it has appeared on the page. To keep writing when one is uncertain is always an act of faith, which grows more and more difficult the more time a writer spends in the familiar habitat of social media.

Is it made clear through Wilkin’s analysis that the new kind of environment created by the internet has forever changed how writing will be conducted in the future. Wilkins wishes to dispel the myth that unless they have free or uninterrupted time, writers should not write, that works of writing always emerge from uninterrupted periods of creative ‘flow.’ In this new digital age, writers must know they can be interrupted (by media or other distractions) at any moment, but write anyway. No longer can writers easily mimic the “reclusive writer” stereotype. They must, instead, adapt to the “unprecedented distractions of the 21st century” (Wilkins).

Wilkins discussed an additional concern related to writers who “do not have resilience” for new projects, and who hang on who one project which may not be worthy for publishing: “These relentless first novels, polished to competence,” but *only* to competence, as she noted, “are the obvious pool from which digital-only imprints and start-ups cherry pick for their tentative publication schedules” (Wilkins). These publishers often lack available finance a the front end of the process (evidenced by the lack of advances in many digital publishers) and, she argued, it is unlikely that these publishers would offer extensive editorial work in all cases (Wilkins). She argues that this leads to the possible decline of editorial standards, and this experimental publishing model (digital-only) does not bode well for authors. Still, however, as Di Leo argues, we have no choice but to adapt to the new environment created by widespread digitalization and the use of social media in the publishing industry.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only served to increase e-book sales and jeopardize the existence of brick-and-mortar bookstores. Predictably, small businesses have taken a huge blow due to decreased traffic. According to an NPD BookScan report released in March 2020 (when quarantines were just beginning in many places in the US), “print unit sales dropped 10% within just a week” (qt. in Rowe). In drastic situations such as a pandemic, e-books have offered many people a safe, accessible way to get their reading fixes. In the long-run, however, it is important to consider the consequences of such incredible growth of popularity. We must acknowledge the accessibility gap that e-books may present, especially concerning the decline of libraries and bookstores. Perhaps most importantly, we must scrutinize the large players in the book industry and recognize when corporate competition turns predatory if we do not want to see a world in which one company has control over the entire industry.

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