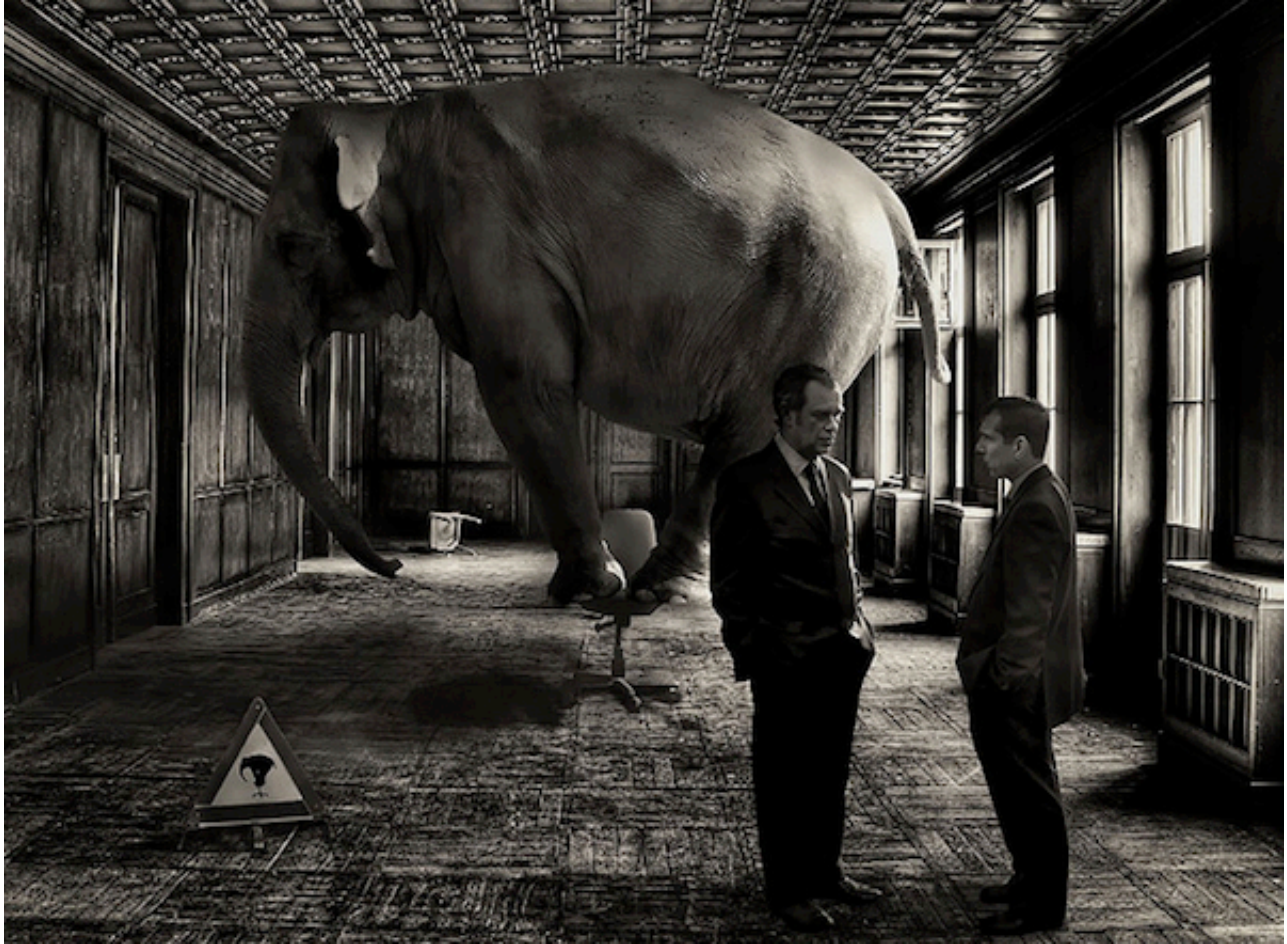


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The Future of the Book

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(Photo by David Blackwell)

Writers, artists, and public intellectuals are nearing some sort of precipice: Their audiences increasingly expect digital content to be free. Jaron Lanier has written and spoken about this issue with great sagacity. You can purchase his book [here](#), which most of you will not do, or you can watch him discuss these matters for free. The problem is thus revealed even in the act of stating it. How can a person like Lanier get paid for being brilliant? This has become an increasingly difficult question to answer.

Where publishing is concerned, the Internet is both midwife and executioner. It has never been easier to reach large numbers of readers, but these readers have never felt more entitled to be informed and entertained for free. I have been very slow to appreciate these developments, and yet it is clear even to me that there are reasons to fear for the life of the printed book. Needless to say, many of the changes occurring in publishing are changes that neither publishers nor authors want. The market for books is continually

shifting beneath our feet, and nobody knows what the business of publishing will look like a decade from now.

When I published *The End of Faith* in 2004, I created this website as an afterthought. In fact, I remember feeling silly asking my publisher to put the web address on the dust jacket, not knowing if there was any point in doing so. While my website has since become the hub of everything I have accomplished as an author, it took me years to understand its utility, and I only began blogging a few months ago. Clearly, I am a slow learner. But many other authors are still pretending that the Internet doesn't exist. Some will surely see their careers suffer as a result. One fact now seems undeniable: The future of the written word is (mostly or entirely) digital.

Journalism was the first casualty of this transformation. How can newspapers and magazines continue to make a profit? Online ads don't generate enough revenue and paywalls are intolerable; thus, the business of journalism is in shambles. Even though I sympathize with the plight of publishers—and share it by association as a writer—as a reader, I am without pity. If your content is behind a paywall, I will get my news elsewhere. I subscribe to the print edition of *The New Yorker*, but when I want to read one of its articles online, I find it galling to have to login and wrestle with its proprietary e-reader. The result is that I read and reference *New Yorker* articles far less frequently than I otherwise would. I've been a subscriber for 25 years, but *The New Yorker* is about to lose me. What can they do? I don't know. The truth is, I now expect their content to be free.

My friend Christopher Hitchens is a writer of truly incandescent prose whose career has been forged almost entirely in the context of print journalism. Among his many outlets, the most prominent has probably been *Vanity Fair*: a gorgeous, glossy magazine to which I also subscribe. Happily, *Vanity Fair* offers its content for free on its website. I visited the site a moment ago and read Hitch's latest: a very tender essay of praise for the work of Joan Didion — another wonderful writer who, I have just learned from Hitch, will soon publish a book about the tragic death of her daughter. This will be a follow up to *The Year of Magical Thinking*, her searing account of the loss of her husband. I will buy and read Didion's new book, just as I bought and read the last one, and I expect that it will be a bestseller. Hitch did his job and got paid. Didion will soon publish her book in hardcover and has already benefited from his review. All appears to be well in the Kingdom of Print.

However, with the gimlet eyes of a new blogger, I detect ominous portents of change. First, I see that Hitch's article has been featured on the *Vanity Fair* website for the better part of a week and has garnered only 813 Facebook likes and 75 Tweets. Many of my blog articles receive more engagement than this, some by nearly a factor of 10. No doubt this has something to do with the ratio of signal to noise: When readers come to a personal blog, they are more or less guaranteed to read what the author has written. How many people will find Hitch's article on the *Vanity Fair* website? Of course, it is prominently displayed on the home page,

along with an arresting photo of Didion taken by Annie Leibovitz, one of the most famous photographers on earth. Presumably, Leibovitz had to go to Didion's apartment with a small crew to obtain this image. All of this creative work was paid for, one imagines, by print ads. But with respect to Hitch's interests as a writer, and Didion's as his subject, everything else in the current issue of *Vanity Fair* is noise. A glance at the online page rank of the magazine raises even greater concerns. I know bloggers—Tim Ferriss and Seth Godin, for instance—whose personal blogs get more traffic than the entire *Vanity Fair* website.

When I began writing the previous paragraph, I forwarded Hitch's article on Facebook and Twitter. Over 3000 people have since followed the link I sent, and we're up to 955 Facebook likes and 100 Tweets. I hesitate to read too much into these metrics, but it doesn't seem entirely crazy to wonder whether a significant percentage of the people who have read Hitch's essay in the last week read it in the last hour because I broadcast it on social media. I used to view this as a wonderful synergy—digital enables print; print points back to digital; and both thrive. I now consider it the death knell for traditional publishing.

Vanity Fair has a print circulation of around 1 million copies; the current issue has a fresh photo of Angelina Jolie on its cover; and Hitch is one of the best writers to ever draw breath. However, I'm reasonably sure that this blog post, or the next one, will reach more readers than his latest gem. For bloggers like Ferriss and Godin, the future arrived long ago: Publishing in *Vanity Fair* would be tantamount to burying their work. This is astounding. Given its range of content, and the costs of acquiring this content, a magazine like *Vanity Fair* should get much more traffic than any one person's blog. And this brings us back to the problem of money: Apart from my occasional use of a webmaster and a graphic designer, my blog employs no one—not even me. Where is all this heading? I can count on one finger the number of places where it is still *obviously* better for me to publish than on my own blog—the opinion page of *The New York Times*. But it's not so much better that I've been tempted to send them an article in the last few months. Is this just the hubris of the blogosphere? Maybe—but not for everyone and not for long.

Related difficulties are now looming for books. I love physical books as much as anyone. And when I really want to get a book into my brain, I now purchase both the hardcover and electronic editions. From the point of view of the publishing industry, I am the perfect customer. This also makes me a very important canary in the coal mine—and I'm here to report that I've begun to feel woozy. For instance, I've started to think that most books are too long, and I now hesitate before buying the next big one. When shopping for books, I've suddenly become acutely sensitive to the opportunity costs of reading any one of them. If your book is 600 pages long, you are demanding more of my time than I feel free to give. And if I could accomplish the same change in my view of the world by reading a 60-page version of your argument, why didn't you just publish a book this length instead?

The honest answer to this last question should disappoint everyone: Publishers can't charge enough money for 60-page books to survive; thus, writers can't make a living by writing them. But readers are beginning to

feel that this shouldn't be their problem. Worse, many readers believe that they can just jump on YouTube and watch the author speak at a conference, or skim his blog, and they will have absorbed most of what he has to say on a given subject. In some cases this is true and suggests an enduring problem for the business of publishing. In other cases it clearly isn't true and suggests an enduring problem for our intellectual life.

These intersecting concerns have now led me to stratify my written work: I am currently writing a traditional, printed book for my mainstream publisher, the Free Press. At the other extreme, I do a lot of writing for free, almost entirely on my blog. In between working for free and working for my publisher, I've begun to experiment with self publishing short ebooks. Last week, I published LYING, my first installment in this genre. The results have been simultaneously thrilling and depressing.

My goal in LYING was to write a very accessible essay on an important topic that could be absorbed in one sitting. I know how revolutionary it is to be honest with everyone one meets—to refuse to shade the truth even slightly in business or in one's personal life—and I know how few people do this. LYING spells out my reasons for thinking that we would all be better off living this way.

The essay appears to have had its desired effect on many readers. But others were not satisfied. Some did not understand the format—a very short book that can be read in 40 minutes—and expected to get a much longer book for \$1.99. Many wondered why it is available only as an ebook. Some fans of ebooks were powerfully aggrieved to find it available only on the Kindle platform—they own Nooks, or detest Amazon for one reason or another. However, the fact is that Amazon made it extraordinarily easy for me to do this; the Kindle Single is the perfect format for so short a book; and Kindle content can be read on every computer and almost any handheld device. I decided that it was not worth my time or other people's money to publish LYING elsewhere, or as a physical book.

On the surface, the launch of LYING has been a great success. It reached the #1 spot for Kindle Singles immediately and #9 for all Kindle content. It is amazing to finish writing, hit "upload," and watch one's work soar and settle, however briefly, above the vampire novels and diet books.

I would be lying, however, if I said that I wasn't stung by some of the early criticism. Some readers felt that a 9000-word essay was not worth \$1.99, especially when they can read my 5000-word blog posts for free. It is true that I put a lot of work into many of my blog posts, but LYING took considerably longer to write than any of them. It is a deceptively simple book—and I made it simple for a reason. Some of my readers seem not to have appreciated this and prefer to follow me into my usual thickets of argument and detail. That's fine. But it is, nevertheless, painful to lose a competition with oneself, especially over a difference of \$1.99.

One thing is certain: writers and public intellectuals must find a way to get paid for what they do—and the opportunities to do this are changing quickly. My current solution is to write longer books for a traditional press and publish short ebooks myself on Amazon. If anyone has any better ideas, please publish them

somewhere—perhaps on a blog—and then send me a link. And I hope you get paid.

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