What Do Publishers Do?

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Sylvia K. Miller, Project Director, University of North Carolina Press

Introduction

Malcolm Margolin, owner of Heyday Books in Berkeley and my first publishing teacher, told his University of California continuing-education class back in 1984 about the concept of a “right book,” one in which the subject and purpose, the tone and writing style, the typeface and interior design, the trim size and type of paper, the cover design and binding—everything about the book—all fit together perfectly in a way that was simply, self-evidently, right. Nothing was jarring or distracting.

The “right book” articulates the ideal that most book publishers still try to follow today, a process by which the author’s ideas are transmitted directly to the reader, and the book’s mission in the world is elegantly accomplished. The downside to this transparency is that in today’s exciting new world of digital communication and do-it-yourself publishing, what professional publishers actually contribute to the publishing process is often unrecognized and underappreciated. The natural invisibility of publishers’ work prompts questions about what value they actually provide and whether it’s worth what customers are asked to pay. The economics of publishing is a subject for another essay, but to begin to answer that question it might be useful to attempt to reveal some of the hard-to-see aspects of publishing. Following is an attempt to review briefly the traditional book-publishing process.

Acquisitions or Commissioning Editors

The acquisitions editor, or commissioning editor, signs contracts with authors for new books, usually in a given field of study or set of fields. The editor might already have a graduate degree in the discipline; if not, she will learn the field by reading books and articles, attending the appropriate conferences, and networking. She tries to get to know everyone and what they are working on, in order to develop contacts who might become authors, or lead to authors, or become peer reviewers. She keeps in mind that these people are also the prime audience for the books that she publishes; she knows them well, and she also knows the competition and the sales history of many other books published by her own company and others.

To shape her list, the editor tries to have her finger on the pulse of the discipline in order to recognize worthy projects and exciting new developments. She will, of course, bring her own tastes and interests to the field as well as a thorough understanding of the particular niche where her company’s catalog might fit. Acquiring a manuscript sometimes involves editing the idea of the book from its inception. Sometimes the idea is the editor’s entirely, while other writing projects undergo a transformation via correspondence with the editor. On the other end of this spectrum are manuscripts already perfectly suited to the press; in these cases, the editor might find herself selling her press to the author.

Most companies have a weekly meeting at which editors present new book projects and discuss them with representatives from all departments, especially marketing and sales. In advance of the meeting, the participants study the editor’s cover memo (sometimes this is a standardized form with a “Reasons to Publish” section) and the packet of accompanying materials, which usually includes a proposal written by the author, an outline or preliminary table of contents, a sample chapter to illustrate the author’s writing style, reviews by qualified experts, a competition analysis, and budget including production costs and projected sales. The valuable discussions that take place at these meetings define the target audience for the project and often hone its contents. Weak projects rejected outright by the group typically have too narrow an audience, so the company cannot anticipate selling enough copies to cover expenses, or the purpose is not compelling and the audience cannot be clearly identified.
A deadline is a powerful thing. The editor sets a schedule with the author; the due date is noted in the contract. The editor prods the author to complete the manuscript via coaching, supporting, encouraging, taking him to dinner, serving as a sounding board—whatever works for that particular author. Editors are typically diplomatic and adaptable, able to work with many different kinds of personalities and help them reach the finish line.

Evaluating proposals and manuscripts takes expertise and care. Quality peer review is not a process that can be automated or crowd sourced. Editors choose reviewers who will understand the manuscript, but who will also challenge it knowledgeably to improve it. Reviews need expert interpretation. Sometimes a reviewer is too focused on details of punctuation to say anything important about the arc of the narrative; this reviewer might not be called upon again. Sometimes the reviewer wants the book to be a different type of book entirely; the editor might glean a few useful notes from his remarks, nevertheless. Sometimes the reviewer critiques one section of the manuscript about which he has deep knowledge; is he too critical, or not critical enough of the rest of the manuscript? Multiple reviews need to be balanced with each other; if one praises the manuscript and another recommends against publication, a third, and perhaps fourth, review will have to be solicited. Textbooks tailored to certain types of courses might receive 20 reviews by professors who teach that course at different types of institutions. The author relies on the editor to interpret the reviews and point out what is most important. The editor annotates the reviews and usually writes a long cover letter to recommend revisions to the author.

Editors at both for-profit and non-profit publishing companies are keen to use the peer-review process well, in order to improve the manuscript and increase the book's chances of success—whether that means selling thousands of copies to a wide audience or a hundred copies to the appropriate academic libraries.

Before being finalized for publication, the manuscript is often revised and reviewed again. Often called “developmental editing,” the editing that is done at this stage by the acquiring editor, or by assistant or freelance editors, can be a kind of shadow co-authoring, or it can be reorganizing and cutting. It is always done with the intended audience in mind.

The final manuscript is approved by the editor and in-house publishing committee, usually the same group that considered the proposal; in a university press, it is also approved by a board of scholars.

The editor must keep tabs on the length of the manuscript and the number and type of illustrations. It is important to keep control for budgetary reasons and also to tailor the book appropriately to the audience. The illustrations need to be obtained in the proper format, and permissions must be cleared. Copyright and fair use are topics for another essay, but it is important to note that publishers must seek permission from each other every day; like librarians, they too want to see a balanced interpretation of fair use, and publishers often push the boundaries of fair use. The editor, and later the copy editor, keeps an eye out for potential legal issues such as libelous statements, in order to protect the author and the company.

The editor formally transmits the final manuscript to production, assembling the illustrations, calculating book-page length, filling out forms about permissions, and any other special aspects and elements. The marketing department launches a marketing plan for the forthcoming book in consultation with the editor. The author fills out a questionnaire about his marketing and publicity contacts and ideas; often, it needs some modification; for example, it is not efficacious to take out an ad in the New York Review of Books for every book. Sometimes there is a flurry of discussion among departments to settle on the most engaging title for the book. When the title is right, it sounds as if it must have been just that way from the beginning!

The editor is often the author’s coach, diplomat, advocate, disciplinarian, and friend. The most successful editors have an instinct for the audience; they have taste, judgment, even an eye for design. They have emotional intelligence and...
are good at talking people into things. Without the editor, the book might not exist at all, or it might be in a very different form—including unfinished! The manuscript is improved during the editorial process in its intrinsic quality as well as its suitability for the intended audience (which might have needed definition by the editor and her colleagues). The editor works behind the scenes; her name might appear in the acknowledgments, if the author happens to think of it.

Most publishers publish only a fraction of the manuscripts that they receive, and keeping up with unsolicited submissions is a huge challenge. In her assigned field, the editor is a valuable filter. Her work is important not only for what she chooses to publish, but also for what she does not publish. In a new world of plenty, in which anyone can publish anything and customers are overwhelmed with information, the value of that filter increases.

As the manuscript moves through the rest of the publication process, the acquisitions editor is still its shepherd, called upon to approve, choose, and mediate.

Copyediting and Production

Copyediting is the final polish that usually happens after the manuscript is officially finalized for publication and transmitted to the production department. (Some companies have a separate manuscript-editorial department that liaises with production, but most larger companies have a merged “EDP”—editorial/design/production—department.) Copyediting is for grammar, style, and consistency. By “style” we mean the Chicago Manual of Style, or MLA style, or APA style, and so forth, often with emendations and exceptions depending on the press, the subject matter, and the audience.

There are many levels of copyediting from light to heavy, depending on the assessment of the manuscript’s needs by the editor and the production editor or production supervisor. Line editing smooths awkward prose (an author whose first language is not English might need extra help in this way) and cuts redundancy. If line editing is necessary, it might be done at the developmental stage or during copyediting.

Sometimes copyediting includes fact checking of various levels of intensity. Fact checking can be slow and expensive. Is it necessary? Many editors could tell you stories about the serious errors caught in this process. Is it cost-effective? Many publishers think not. Thorough checking of every fact is rarely done anymore, although most copy editors routinely check the spelling of proper names and some dates.

Copyediting, and the training and supervising of copy editors, is a specialized skill. Querying the author usefully and diplomatically is an art. Although some repetitive changes and tagging of elements such as headings are typically automated, most copyediting cannot be usefully automated, and offshore copyediting is incomplete at best. Managing editors and production editors choose copy editors by testing them carefully, and they train them with great attention to detail. Most copyediting is done on a freelance basis, although some companies have copy editors on staff. Freelancers often work for the same short list of publishers for decades.

Will the audience notice if certain terms are not capitalized or hyphenated the same way throughout the book, if the author missed on subject-verb agreement, if “which” instead of “that” is used in restrictive clauses, and so on? One can argue the relative importance of these and myriad other editing details—and editors do, indeed, argue them endlessly—but the main purpose is to remove distractions and bring the author’s words to the reader’s understanding smoothly, clearly, and directly.

The author reviews the copyediting and responds to queries; an in-house editor (variously called the managing editor, manuscript editor, production supervisor, or production editor) incorporates the author’s responses into the manuscript, makes sure all the elements are styled correctly, and then finalizes the manuscript and illustrations for typesetting.
Design and Typesetting

The cover design is intended to market the book; after review by editorial, marketing, and sales staff, it is often revised. The author does not always see the cover or have veto power over it, although no one is happy if she dislikes it, so more diplomacy and negotiation are often needed at this stage, with the acquisitions editor involved.

The interior design adheres to traditions of visual balance but is usually created anew for each book. A template sometimes forms the basis of the design, with the individual character of the book reflected in a change of display typeface for chapter titles and headings. The art of interior design and the skill of type specification produce results that are usually transparent and noticed only subconsciously by most readers. When a book design calls attention to itself, that is of course intentional, suited to the subject matter. The design usually is routed to the editorial and marketing departments for review and approval.

Typesetting is done either in house or by an outside vendor; elements identified by the copy editor are tagged, and the typesetter flows the word-processed manuscript into a template, based on the book’s design, in the typesetting software. Despite the automated paging process, readers might be surprised to know that the typesetter typically spends hours tweaking the typeset file, to improve visual balance across two-page spreads, place illustrations and special features, fix widows, and so on.

Also surprising is how many errors turn up in proofreading, even though manuscripts are rarely rekeyed. Typeset text can provide a new visual clarity for the author and production editor, revealing errors. When corrections are made, they have to be checked by the production editor or an assistant; sometimes new errors are introduced and there are several rounds of proofing minor items. Sometimes collation of corrections from co-authors or co-editors is needed, and version control requires organized work habits. Fortunately, proofing is usually done electronically, and various stages of page proof are no longer in the form of stacks of paper that used to pile up and fill office shelves, credenzas, and windowsills.

Indexing, sometimes by the author per instructions from the publisher, and sometimes by a professional indexer, is based on the final page proofs. Indexing is another fascinating topic for a separate essay, but suffice it to say that this interpretation of search terms by a human brain that understands both the book and the needs of the audience is an important contribution to the book’s usability in any format.

Manufacturing choices include the type of binding, the type of paper, endpapers, and sometimes headbands. The paper type is chosen for appropriate thickness (pages per inch), opacity, and color (every manufacturer offers myriad variations of white and off-white). The choice is optimized for the type of illustrations in the book. The final typesetting file is converted to a PDF for printing and to other types of digital files for publication as an e-book. Today, e-books have a reputation for being error-filled with annoyances such as missing chapter numbers and stray code-like gibberish interrupting the narrative; the reason is that conversions must be checked carefully for errors, and not all publishers have yet determined how to budget for this additional time and effort. Integrating the preparation of print and electronic files more closely would produce more consistent results, but such integrated processes are still in development, and implementation can be costly.

Transparent and unnoticed when done well, production details are annoying and distracting to the reader when executed sloppily. In other areas of life, we have given up quality for convenience and/or low cost, leading some bibliophiles to fear that someday only special collectors’ editions in print will display traditional book-production values. However, an alternate and very real possibility is that digital editions will increasingly improve in quality until their design is as individual and attractive, via every software platform and e-reading device, as they were in print.
Marketing and Publicity

To define terms briefly, marketing is generally the marketing that we pay for, such as advertisements, brochures, catalogs, bookmarks, the company website, and meeting displays. Publicity is generally the marketing that we get for free, but it’s important to note that it still takes staff time to get it. In this category are online social media, including working with authors on guest blog posts; arranging author tours, book signings, and other events; pitching the books to publications that might excerpt or review them; sending free review copies where the expert publicist knows it’s worth doing; writing press releases and preparing media packets; and coaching the author on how to be interviewed. Marketing and publicity are targeted to the audience, so as not to waste time and money. Reviews appear in appropriate publications, and the author gets interviewed on NPR, not because the best work is automatically noticed by the most appropriate media, but rather because someone worked on it. What the publicist did was behind the scenes, invisible to the public; it seems perfectly natural when it happens. "Oh," says the author, opening her favorite history magazine, "They've reviewed my book!" Typically, when she telephones the editor to tell her about it, she already knows.

Marketing and publicity appear to cause self-published authors the most frustration. Many of them might need to reevaluate whether the product they produced is optimally targeted to the intended audience in the first place, and whether that audience is clearly and realistically defined and truly wants to read that book. The author might need an established publisher’s expertise to shape the concept. If they have done that part well, then they may need a publisher to help them with marketing and publicity, both for the expertise and the staff time that needs to be spent in exercising it.²

Sales and Distribution

Editorial and marketing staff provide sales representatives and vendors (whether for libraries, direct-to-consumers) with information tailored to their needs. This data includes both the content files in various electronic forms for different purposes (typesetting files such as InDesign or LaTeX, PDF, universal PDF, EPUB, XML) and the data about it. Every outlet requires both the content and the metadata in a slightly different form. Publishers need staff dedicated to data management and a digital-asset management system.

The printed and bound books have to be stored in a warehouse; each book has a bar code and International Standard Book Number (ISBN). Books are returnable, making it challenging to track revenue and profit/loss. It is important to track stock levels and order reprints in time; on the other hand, it is not cost-effective to have a 10-year supply of a book sitting in the warehouse. Warehousing, customer service, and managing returns are also part of the cost of distribution.

Print-on-demand technology is sometimes touted as a cost-saver and an ideal transitional strategy. However, until customer demand for print books diminishes almost entirely, print-on-demand production of physical books will not be cost effective. While the ability to produce books in ones and twos does provide new flexibility for keeping a publisher’s backlist available, the unit cost is high, and traditional printing is more affordable for books needing to be produced in the hundreds or thousands.

Most publishers have sales representatives who sell their books to bookstores; many sales forces are made up of free agents who represent various publishers. The marketing and sales departments host seasonal meetings with these groups to present the front list of books to them and give them all the information they need. Although their portion of the business is shrinking as online retailers increase their market share, these sales reps still sell significant numbers of books and serve as a valuable source of feedback.

Subsidiary Rights

The publisher represents the author in handling permission requests and soliciting translation deals. Other “sub rights” listed in the contract might be serial, dramatic, or movie rights. In most cases the publisher does not own the copyright,
but rather licenses it from the author for the life of the contract in order to provide services and share the revenue. Subsidiary rights managers develop systems for granting permission and networks of contacts, including information about which foreign publishers are interested in which types of books. Could authors do this time-consuming work themselves and keep all the money? Certainly, but why not turn to the next book, instead?

**Electronic Publishing**

Increasingly the e-book is produced for simultaneous publication with the print book. You might have heard that sales of e-books are increasing exponentially and that publishers are slow to change. Note, however, that customers are slower. A doubling of e-book sales from 2011 to 2012 meant, typically, that 4% of a typical publisher’s revenue from e-books became 8% the next year. This is an impressive increase, but publishers are still earning, say, 92% from print books. To anticipate a digital future, they invest in new technologies and workflows, hire new people, and train and re-train others, while maintaining the print process. Carrying on these two ways of producing books at the same time is expensive, and integrating them for greater efficiency is a challenge.  

New technologies and workflows have great potential to make book production faster, more efficient, and more flexible. There is also exciting potential for books to become multimedia productions that are contextually connected to each other and to other related resources such as archives, facilitating a richer, more convenient reading, learning, and research environment. Despite the many software developers and service vendors vying for new business from publishers, however, the path to the best practices of the future is not at all clear, leading larger publishers to spend a great deal of money on research and development and smaller publishers to wait on the sidelines with the intention to take lessons from others’ mistakes.

**Conclusion**

It is important for authors, librarians, and readers to recognize that publishing always costs money. In different models, the price is paid in different ways. Whether the source of funding is the customer; the hosting institution; a granting foundation or agency; an author who has contributed funds to reduce the cost to the customer; or a cloud-based service that has business reasons to offer free services in exchange for market information, eyes on ads, or the opportunity to up-sell—there is always a cost. Today there are many different sustainability models. Traditional publishers offer a model that is well developed and practical; new publishers would do well to learn from it before they throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Publishers not only “add value” but are inextricably involved in the making of value. Much like the work of librarians in spirit, their work is a service. Publishing well requires time and attention, and it takes expertise. As more libraries, individuals, small publishers, and technology companies enter the publishing arena, many find that publishing successfully may not be as easy as it looks. Perhaps work and skills that were once invisible will be revealed and sought after as more people try to be publishers; sometimes, they might find that expert services are worth paying for. Despite attempts to professionalize it with certificate and masters’ programs, publishing is still predominantly an apprenticeship business. Publishers would do well to share their knowledge and skills more intentionally and widely, both in order to help audiences and customers understand what they are paying for and in order to make sure that new publishers—whether working within publishing companies, developing library publishing services, or out on their own—have the benefit of established publishers’ experience and expertise.

One reason that the digital revolution is so challenging for book publishers is that it is happening with excruciating slowness.
publishing is still a relatively small proportion of the business, and publishers still have to manage multiple business models for sustainability. Competition and experimentation in this challenging environment are healthy. The explosion of interest in publishing by individuals and small groups is exciting and positive in many ways for entrepreneurship, the economy, communications, human rights, and publishing. Big-fish publishers continue to swallow up smaller ones, but no one really wants to see only two gargantuan book publishers surviving in the United States. A vibrant publishing industry should always have creative, individual, even quirky new publishers constantly percolating.

Publishing today is endlessly dynamic; publishers need to understand that it will not simply change once and then stop, so all they have to do is get over the bump! One hopes that the challenge posed by alternative models will make traditional publishers better at what they do, rather than prompt them to cut corners defensively, diminish the quality of their services, and become—and this is a real danger—worse publishers who are easier to replace. Democratization of the publishing process, new kinds of digital scholarship, and an expansion of the definition of “publishing” will challenge publishers to be more flexible and find ways to continually develop new services to meet the needs of scholars, librarians, teachers, students, and all the wonderful people everywhere who like to read good books.

1 Based on the limits of my experience, this brief review will focus on nonfiction book publishing in the humanities and social sciences.

2 I belong to an e-mail listserv called “EBooks, EBook Readers, Digital Books, and Digital Content Publishing,” in which individuals share information about self-publishing projects or small cottage publishing companies they are attempting to start up. Following are two telling examples. From an e-mail dated May 17, 2012: “Had fun writing it, but don’t care for the promotion part, since I’m not the social type and not very good at promoting….Will continue trying to promote for a little while longer but may give up if sales don’t start happening, and maybe write a book about what a horrible experience it was.” From an e-mail dated August 3, 2011: “In the new digital world, how do we market? How do we get "discovered"? Very few of us can afford ad campaigns and perhaps even fewer are getting interviews on network TV. Tell us what’s been your experience -- what’s worked and what hasn’t? Websites? Blogs? Community sites devoted to the subject matter? Amazon? Barnes & Noble? iBooks? Kobo? Sony? Others internationally like Waterstone’s? Let’s chat.”

3 A note about journal publishing: In the past, journal publishers produced an archivable product—a print journal issue—and sent it to libraries, where it was archived and made accessible to users. In contrast, over the past couple of decades, many journal publishers have developed library-like online environments in which to make their journals available; these vast systems include services such as full-text searching, links at the article level to the library’s online catalog, personalized online spaces for professors and students, citation linking, user statistics, and perpetual archiving. Publishers have invested millions of dollars developing these systems to serve their library customers, who have come to rely upon them. Unfortunately, these publishing systems are expensive. Libraries learn this from a new perspective when, in attempting to create such systems independent of commercial publishers, they find ongoing funding and perpetual archiving challenging.

4 The Publishing the Long Civil Rights Movement project, which was funded by the Mellon Foundation and which I directed from 2008 to 2012, allowed UNC Press to experiment with these possibilities. We created an experimental online collection that allowed registered users to link published scholarship to archives and other resources via a commenting feature; later, we published e-books called portal books, which included multimedia examples and outbound links (see Freedom’s Teacher by Katherine Charron and Blowout! by Mario Garcia). One by one, more
scholarly publishers are experimenting with this kind of publishing, but it requires both technological know-how and editorial time that many cannot afford. Meanwhile, many libraries are intrepidly experimenting with new forms of scholarly communication and publishing services for scholars.

5 At a Purdue University workshop for librarians who are starting up new publishing programs, one librarian asked the group how she might go about locating appropriate reviewers for a monograph manuscript. I was deeply impressed by her entrepreneurial spirit and dedication to meeting the needs of the faculty author, who had not found another outlet to publish and share his work. At the same time, I was dismayed by her ignorance of scholarly editorial practice. I would like to see both publishers and librarians do more to bridge this gap.

6 For example, in the mid-1990s it was easy to see that multivolume print reference sets were going to disappear; two decades later, they are still being printed and sold in ever-diminishing numbers. Within multiple companies and imprints, I have seen several false starts at digital publishing and workflows.