Back Talk-Amazon

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John Kenneth Galbraith famously said that the man who enters a room by leaping on a broken door — and then crashing and stumbling through it when it fails — gets an undeserved reputation for violence. I’ve always thought of that line when I stop to think about Jeff Bezos and Amazon.

What Bezos did in the mid-90s seemed revolutionary. Yes, he dramatically upended the bookselling business and has taken huge market share away from the players in that space and now throws his weight around enormously. But he had help.

The bookselling business back in the 1990s, like the taxi-driving business five years ago, was surrounded by opportunities the established players were too blind to see. Remember what it was like to special order a particular book at your local bookstore then? You had to page through the blindly small print of Books in Print, fill out a little form (usually with carbons), and wait 3-6 weeks, calling the store a few times to see if it had come in.

After that time, there was a very good chance you’d be told they’d been unable to find the title and almost as good a chance that they’d have something but it would be the wrong thing.

It wasn’t any magical new technology Amazon used to improve on that state of affairs. A database, an online interface to an order form, and a contract with UPS to deliver didn’t require wizardry beyond imagining. The existing industry could have done all that. But the booksellers of 1995 and the taxis of 2015 that let ride sharing eat their lunch both missed their chance.

So when Amazon started opening “bricks and mortar” stores a few months ago, I was curious. A few weeks ago, I took a quick trip up to Chicago to see what the future looks like. What can librarians learn from the deep insights Amazon must have about books and print and bringing users and books together?

I was amazed.

My Uber (not a taxi) dropped me off in front of a nondescript storefront on the north side, in a gentrifying neighborhood a few blocks from Wrigley Field, and I slipped inside. The first thing I noticed was how small the shop was: about 3,000 square feet, by my later pacing it off. On my right was a coffee bar with no customers on a weekday morning, in front of me was a table for displaying Amazon’s Echo product, and I could see more e-gadgets off to the right. The books started on my left.

There weren’t many books. I stayed a couple of hours, counting, obsessing, and scratching my head to make sense of what I saw.

OK, there were two things about the store you could call innovations. First, all the books were displayed face out, covers front. And there were no price tags. To find out what any book costs, you need to have the app on your phone and scan it or take it to one of several scanners in the store, there to see the price for the general public and another price for Amazon Prime customers.

The store has about 3,600 titles, evenly decided among children’s books (about 1,200), what I call “books lite” (arts and crafts, travel guides, self-help, business and money, gardening — another 1,200), and what I call “real books” (history, fiction, biography, “assorted nonfiction” and the like). With separate sections for science fiction (140 titles), mysteries (140 titles), and romance literature (21 titles!), the core of fiction and literature came to 400 titles.

Not much? You’re right.

Take mysteries. There was room on the shelves for 140 titles, but with blank spaces, there were actually about 108. There were four James Patterson titles, four Tana French, three Janet Evanovich, two Louise Penny, two Craig Allen Johnson/Longmire, and one (the most recent) Donna Leon. Alexander McCall Smith was represented in the store only by the first title in the Ladies Detective Agency series, Andrea Camilleri by the most recent paperback Inspector Montalbano. Of pre-contemporary mysteries, there were three Agatha Christies (a volume of Poirot short stories, Then There Were None, and Murder on the Orient Express), two Raymond Chandlers (The Big Sleep and The Long Goodbye), two mass-market paperbacks of Sherlock Holmes, two by Ian Fleming. Those 12 authors accounted for 27 of the 108 titles on the shelves. If I were a James Patterson reader, would I think a store with four of his titles would be a good place to shop?

No author that I saw anywhere was represented by more than four titles. In history, the only one with that many was Bill O’Reilly. In history, the only two titles published before about the year 2000 were Dee Brown’s Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee and Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood (history?). In literature, the only two authors at all well represented were Elena Ferrante (all four of her quartet) and Tolkien’s Hobbit and LOTR. Other notables were: J.D. Salinger (Franny and Zooey and Nine Stories); Jane Austen (Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility); Vladimir Nabokov (Lolita); Leo Tolstoy (War and Peace); Homer (Odyssey); James Joyce (Dubliners). But there were three different editions of To Kill a Mockingbird — for the few remaining Chicaqans who have never read it? I found exactly 10 books in the fiction/literature section written by writers born before 1900.

Perhaps Bezos has never been interested in books? Perhaps, for him, they were a gateway drug, a place to start. Book buyers, after all, are intelligent, middle class and above all, with discretionary cash. Bust through the infirm door of the bookselling business, capture a vast audience of consumers, and then set out to sell them everything else. If you’re Bezos, you don’t really have to care about books, or people who read books, or what becomes of the culture when you destabilize publishers and bookstores: probably books themselves don’t matter to you.

My suspicion is that the store (and others opened since) exists in order to pretend to be a bookstore, to lure in people like me, but really to sell the high-margin electronic items. The Echo product is still an abstract concept to many, so the store is a convenient a place where to lure folks in for a demo. A less generous interpretation would be that they’ve just made a silly mistake!

The real future of the printed book won’t be determined by Jeff Bezos, nor should we expect it to be, nor should we let it be. There are still many highly trained professionals who are serious about bringing books and readers together — lots of books, even old books, and lots of readers. The name for that group of people is “librarians.” We shouldn’t walk around the virtual and physical worlds of Amazon retail just shaking our heads. This is our opportunity.

At Arizona State University, we currently have a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to begin rethinking, for a huge library renovation we’re beginning, just what we do with print books when we set them out on shelves for our readers. Which books? How
Sup & comers to:
a new topic thread: Up & Coming (UC). The
topic threads into the following groups:
simpler, we have re-organized our session top-
finished before the weekend.
attendees and will be a welcome change to be
day! We hope the transition will be easier for
Wednesday for the Vendor Showcase — can't
Friday. I keep confusing myself by thinking
main conference will be Wednesday through
Vendor Showcase will be on Tuesday, and the
ences will be on Monday and Tuesday, the

For CMU’s strategic direction, see
Announcements for the Charleston Library Conference
Charleston Comings and Goings: News and
• Make a stronger case to attend the
• Become actively involved in the
The UC thread is a terrific opportunity for
• Those with no or limited prior ex
• New to the Charleston Conference.
• New to the specific areas of focus of the Charleston Conference (collection development, acquisitions, instruction, scholarly communication, technical services, vendor/publisher relations).
• MLIS students and recent graduates.
• Those with no or limited prior experience presenting at professional conferences.
The UC thread is a terrific opportunity for up & comers to:
• Become actively involved in the Charleston Conference.
• Make a stronger case to attend the Charleston Conference.

back again for another year, the Juried Product Development Forums will be available for librarians/library workers attending the conference. These focus groups are designed for publishers and vendors with new products that are currently in development, or who are in the process of making improvements to existing products, to seek feedback and input from their users. It is a chance for librarians to influence the development, pricing, and features of the products they may be using in the future. The goal of these sessions is to be a win-win situation — not to be a commercial or promotion, but to actively work together to the benefit of everyone involved. Invitations will be emailed to registered librarians later this month, so be on the lookout and be sure to RSVP to attend the session of your choice.

Registration is still open, and the early bird discount deadline is September 15. Don’t miss out on the significantly lower rate! Preconference registration is also still available, and if you’ve already registered for the conference but wish to add a preconference you can do so at https://www.charlestonlibraryconference.com/conference-registration-2/. A complete list of preconferences is available at https://2017.charlestonconference.sched.com/overview/type/Preconference.

That’s it for now — stay tuned to the Charleston Conference website and the Against the Grain NewsChannel for more updates: www.charlestonlibraryconference.com and www.against-the-grain.com.