

# The Role and Future of the Traditional Book Publisher

David R. Godine

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**Abstract** The world of publishing is one that is rapidly changing, and it is hard to see in what direction it is going. To understand the role of the publisher and, indeed, to understand the role of books is no light undertaking. But rather an exploration into the advancement of technology and the ways in which books and their production and consumption will be irrevocably changed, David R. Godine takes a poignant look at this issue, and discusses what it means to be a publisher today, and in the future.

**Keywords** Book production · Books · E-books · Future of publishing · Global · Godine · Gutenberg · Print · Publishing · Typeface

My first inclination when asked to submit this paper was simply to discuss the more important Godine books from the past 40 years. This, combined with a little superfluous commentary to entertain you with tales of past indiscretions and serious miscalculations, would leave the reader amused but hardly enlightened or improved. But on considering this, it seemed that a more interesting, and perhaps more illuminating, approach would be instead to consider the role of the publisher, and indeed publishing, in the twenty-first century. What will it mean, in the next 25 or 50 years, to be a part of what has been until recently a fairly predictable and stable profession, but one whose demands are changing rapidly and whose definition and role have become increasingly cloudy and obscure? What will, in the next decades, be our “voice” and will it be heard? And if heard, will it be important?

In the past, publishers have been primarily arbiters; arbiters of taste, which generally reflected their own predilections and passions, arbiters of presentation,

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D. R. Godine (✉)

David R. Godine Publisher, 15 Court Square, Suite 320, Boston, MA 02108, USA  
e-mail: cdieringer@godine.com

how their material would be packaged, designed and presented, arbiters of edition and price—how many copies it would be safe to print and at what price point a copy could be prudently and profitably sold. Remember that books, almost alone among consumer items, still have their prices printed on their flaps, announcing at once to the consumer what the publisher at least thinks the product is worth and presumably at what price it would be bought.

To be sure, the methods of production have evolved over time. Before the fifteenth century and the invention of printing, the dissemination of knowledge was limited to what a scribe, or an assembly line of scribes, could produce. Information, and the access to information, was limited to those who could (a) read and (b) afford the luxury of a handwritten manuscript. It was a circle limited to a wealthy minority. As Lewis Mumford points out, even at the height of Roman civilization, when there was no shortage of slaves to do the required work, probably only one or two thousand copies at most was the highest circulation any text could achieve.

The invention of movable type changed this radically—just how radically I think we are apt to underestimate. If any one of the estimates I have read is even remotely correct, then between 16 and 22 million books were printed in the first 45 years of printing, the so-called incunabula period, between the appearance of the Gutenberg, or 42 line, Bible in 1455 and 1500. This was close to, or greater than, one book for every man, woman and child living in Europe at the time, an explosion that would change forever the class monopoly on the distribution of culture. It also belies the assumption that the population of central Europe was mostly illiterate. If we extrapolate and compare this to the explosion in the ownership of personal computers within the past decade, the statistics look very similar.

But the distribution of texts was still confined to the printed book, and books were printed most frequently, at least according to Pollard and Ehrman, in editions of 500 to 1000 copies. Yet despite the smallish editions, the perimeter of distribution was remarkable and reprints were frequent. In that same 50 year period, some 25–40,000 separate editions appeared. If you read the tables in Pollard and Ehrman's *The Distribution of Books by Catalogue*, you can see that editions issued by the great Venetian publisher Aldus were stored in warehouses throughout the major European capitals. The same was true of the distribution of type from the very beginnings of printing. For example, Updike in his *Printing Types* shows an italic from a Venetian title printed in the early sixteenth century and assumes the type had to be of Italian origin. In fact, the italic was first used in Basle and was probably taken to Venice by Peter Schoeffer the younger around 1540. It was distributed throughout Europe, and, as A.F. Johnson demonstrates, there was hardly a printing center in Europe in which it was not employed. This may sound arcane, the minutia of a besotted mind, but my point is that books, and the types used to print them, and therefore information, were “global” long before we brought the term into common use.

And there is no question that the price of books was driven down dramatically by the printing process; by the time Aldus issued his first octavo editions in 1501, the price in real dollars for an edition of a scholarly book had been driven down to roughly 50 cents to a dollar. And as important as the price point was to scholarship, the possibility of genuine textual criticism was probably even more significant. For

the first time, scholars could refer to a specific edition's page and line, and fellow scholars throughout Europe could go to identical editions and be, as we say today, "on the same page." The area that comprises our knowledge expands and enlarges the periphery of our curiosity. As my old math teacher, Mr. Bridges, used to say, "As the area of our knowledge expands, the circumference of our ignorance grows proportionately greater." Printing has never fully filled the gaps in our knowledge, but rather exploded the circumference of our curiosity.

It is a mistake, I think, to consider these early entrepreneurs as "printers" as opposed to publishers. The basic definition of a publisher is someone who makes something public; also as the *primum mobile* who takes the basic risks. But in the case of all these fifteenth century printers, they were also responsible for selecting the texts they wished to issue, for deciding on the editors who would be responsible for editing the texts (no mean challenge when the texts were often multiple, corrupt, and incomplete), on the typefaces in which the texts would be set, and these often involved multiple choices depending on the subject—sacred or secular, on how or if the book would be illustrated, and, of course, in what format and at what price it would be issued. It's true that many of them did their own printing, but if the basic responsibilities of publishing are first, the choice of what *is* to be printed and second, the effort and ability to make that printing *public* (which is, after all the root of the word "publishing"), then they were *publishers* first and foremost.

That most of them did their own printing, or at least oversaw it, seems to me beside the point. It was not, after all, until the nineteenth century that the bifurcation between printer and publisher becomes tangible, and some of you reading this text can probably recall the days when the major university presses, among them Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Chicago and Stanford, owned and operated their own printing facilities and composing rooms. Was Yale University Press, in the days when it was known for the quality of its printing, primarily a printer or a publisher? It was, of course, a *publisher*, printing only aiding and abetting its primary mission. But the point I am making is that whatever the means of production, the basic choices, *including* the means of production—the choice of text, editors, format, pricing, distribution and whether or not to keep a book in print, has rested until very recently with one, or at most a small cadre of professionals, whose job it was to make these decisions wisely and, as often as possible, profitably.

In recent times, of course, those particular responsibilities have been fragmented; we now have an editorial department, a marketing department, a production department, a sales department, etc. But when the book comes off the presses, it still remains a book published by "Random House" or "Alfred A. Knopf" or Yale University Press or David R. Godine, Publisher. It is the personalities who work there who have made the decisions, and "Personalities," as Wilde observed, "move the age more than principles." It remains a series of personal decisions, even under the shelter of a corporate umbrella, that result in the palpable and recognizable form of a finished book.

Now consider for a moment how this has changed. With the advent of the personal computer maybe 20 years ago, everyone who owned one not only had the capacity to write but also to *compose* a book, that is, to set it in a legible typeface and in a format that followed basic formulae that have changed very little in

500 years. What they couldn't do was *distribute* the book; for that they still needed a "publisher"—someone with access to the distribution channels, the retailers, wholesales, gift stores, to which and through which books have traditionally been sold. They needed the publisher also to produce the books in quantities that would insure and allow a reasonable unit cost, a risk that only a few authors like Edward Tufte, were willing to take but at which most balked. And finally, with perhaps less reason, they needed the credibility that a legitimate publisher's imprint conferred, one that would make it more likely that the book would be noticed, reviewed, and ultimately purchased, more than a title issued under the imprint of a vanity press or one's own name. All very good reasons for sticking with the model as it had existed for over 500 years.

But what is the model for the future? I would argue that the introduction of the Internet has dramatically changed what we have regarded as the constants of this equation. Think about it for a minute: does the prospective author any longer require the traditional publisher for all, or indeed for *any*, of these services? If you are a well-known author, let's say a Stephen King or a John Irving, and your commodity has been already tested and succeeded in the marketplace, could you not make your novel available on the web, charge the consumer directly for its download and keep all the money for yourself rather than sharing it with a publisher. You would, and could, thereby bypass entirely *all* the usual services provided by the publisher. Since we buy books first by the credibility and familiarity of the author's name, once that has been established, does he require the offices of a publisher to make it better known or more beloved. Or in the case of someone like Edward Tufte who knows his subject better than anyone else on earth, why should he throw himself on the tender mercies of a university press, accept some derisory offer of 10% of net receipts, and then watch his book most likely go out of print within a few years. Or in the case of the increasingly common and frustrated first-time author who firmly and intractably believes his talents are God's gift to humanity but who cannot find a commercial publisher who shares a similar faith, why not take the risk themselves and, if successful, reap all the benefits? The fastest-growing segment of the publishing and printing industry is now in books that are self-published, printed on demand, on a decent paper, often with a decent design, and with the very attractive choice of printing exactly as many, or as few, copies as required.

So the publishers' traditional role as the "gatekeepers of culture," the arbiter of the many decisions that go into making a book "public," the source of distribution, the fount from which the printed word has traditionally been issued, is now in serious doubt.

Ponder a few more sobering realities. If we have learned anything about the younger generation in the past decade, it is that they more and more expect information, in any guise—movies, songs, books—to be provided if not free, then at minimal cost. They seem to assume that this is their natural birthright and as much mistaken as those reading this article may consider this attitude, it is a reality. You can now buy e-books on-line, delivered to almost any computer platform, for under \$10.00. Of the recent bestseller *Freedom* by Jonathan Franzen, a full 35% of the sales have been through e-books. What is even more disturbing is our inability to control the dispersal of e-files once they are once made public. If the genie is let out

of the jar, it is considered fair game for any poacher and this, combined with the attitude that *all* texts (if not all government secrets and confidential information) should be made available gratis as a more or less pro bono gesture means that with every passing year more books *will* be made available in this way—with no income going either to the publisher, who took the initial risk, or the author, who made the creative effort. If we can't keep secret government documents from going viral, how do we expect to keep the works James Joyce under control?

If you are beginning to think that publishing would be a very risky choice of professions for yourself or your children, you are correct. Godine has, and probably will, continue to survive because it has concentrated, more than most, on the book as an object—on the book, if you will, as cultural artifact. Focus on the book as art. And I am acutely aware that I am probably among the last of a generation of publishers who began working with hot metal sorts set in composing sticks of type, moved on to offset lithography, passed through the stages of film setting to digital composition and will end, I would guess, in front of a computer screen. This personal transition has taken place in just 40 years, and it is not stretching the truth to say that if Gutenberg could have walked into the deserted cow barn in which we began in Brookline, he would, within an hour or so, have understood everything that was happening. Not so today. Printing *has* evolved rapidly and dramatically, but the activities involved in *publishing*, as we have seen, have changed very little. And although these past 25 years have seen massive shifts in the *means* of production—from letterpress to offset, from hot metal to pixels, the end product, the printed book, has remained relatively unchanged, instantly recognizable, almost identical to its antecedents of 550 years ago. A form perfectly suited to its function, one that any 5 year old knows how to operate. Think about this; how many calls have you made about how to operate a book? Did you ever have to buy a user's manual? Do you know where to find the title page and the index? Do you require instructions on how to turn the pages or turn them back? Can you go back to a book you bought a decade ago and still find your favorite passage and make it work?

But the digital book, read on a screen, transmitted instantaneously, and downloaded for a fraction of the cost of a printed volume, is a different animal entirely. It is a system open to everyone, and the user has total control over the size, the formatting, and even the background color of the “printed” page. Gone is the idea of an identical text in identical editions, and with it the possibility of textual editing. As for the actual product; well, what *is* the actual product? This is what I would like to end discussing.

For almost 600 years the introduction of any new graphic process has generally marked the high point in its particular development. Think about this; with the *Gutenberg Bible*, the first printed book, we arrive at what many consider that the apogee of letterpress printing an achievement never again surpassed. Some consider everything in its wake little more than a footnote. Certainly, by the mid sixteenth century in France, every textual and typographic device used in the modern book had been both invented and perfected—folios, running heads, the title page, part titles, footnotes, the index. The roman letter, as developed and cut by artists like Garamond, Griffo and Granjon is very much the same roman letter we read today. Woodcuts, introduced late in the fifteenth century reached the height of their power

and beauty in mid-sixteenth century France. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, etching and engraving had replaced the woodcut as the preferred mediums for pictorial representation, and by the early nineteenth century aquatint under masters like Ackermann and chromolithography had reached their pinnacle. Even wood engraving, reinvented by Bewick at the turn of the century and carried forward by him and any followers and students—Linton and Harvey, as well as professional engravers like Swain, the Dalziells and Edmund Evans, was a perfected medium, within the first 50 years. In each instance, the artistic apogee occurred within fifty to a hundred years of the techniques' introduction.

There are, I think, only two deviants from this rule a) the halftone screen, which remained for over a century a totally inferior method of reproducing full tone originals and in fact remained so until the development of "fine line, full tone offset", for which read 300 line screen duotone printing, was perfected at the Meriden Gravure Company, which did for halftones what Woodbury type, heliotype, collotype, gravure, and countless other forgotten nineteenth century processes had achieved a century earlier.

The second deviation, I would argue, is the e-book. People may buy and use e-books for their convenience, for their access to information, for their ability to store and call up a myriad of novels, poetry and the classics. But surely no one reads them, or uses them, or buys them, because they are beautiful objects in and of themselves. And in this respect they differ markedly from their antecedents in the graphic arts; they are instruments, pure and simple, instruments that, unlike the book, which for all purposes reached the end of its formal physical development as an object in its first 50 years, will continue to develop and evolve until this first generation is totally unrecognizable, and probably totally unusable. If and as these devices supplant and replace the traditional book, they will not be seen as providing a new and better process, or in their desirability as physical objects, but merely as better and faster transmitters of information.

Books, on the other hand, or books that endure, can be, I would argue, works of art. They perfectly combine form and function. They cleverly juxtapose image and text. They are composed in the 26 letters of a phonetic alphabet that we instantly recognize. And if they happen to be in English, they partake of the largest, the most varied, the most mongrelized, and the most subtle, vocabulary of any language in the world.

Many of you probably remember the PBS series "Civilization", written and narrated by Sir Kenneth Clark. In that first episode he stands on the Pont des Arts, looking across the Seine at the Louvre, and contemplates the meaning of civilization. He begins his series of talks with this quote from Ruskin:

"Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts; the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others, but of the three the only trustworthy one is the last."