

Lives & letters

To mark World Book Day **Stephen Page**, president of the Publishers Association argues that in our digital age the relationship between editors and writers is more important than ever

Publish or be damned

In February 1934, Geoffrey Faber, founder of Faber & Faber, gave a lecture to the Oxford University English Club entitled "Are publishers any use?" It may come as no surprise to hear that he felt they were, despite "the modern view of a publisher as . . . less an arbiter of taste than a parasitic middle-man".

This came to mind when, at last year's Frankfurt Book Fair, I read an article in the Bookseller by an agent who suggested that, in the digital age, writers would no longer need publishers. They would simply post their work online with various retailers and offer their books as downloads or through print on demand. For this they would receive full value for their work, minus a (rather surprising, I thought) 20 per cent commission to the agent. He didn't go into what the agent might do to earn 20 per cent, but he was very clear that publishers were unlikely to add value to this process.

So I am prompted to ask again: are publishers any use? What reasons do they have to exist? What will they do in the future? And, crucially, has the book entered the last phase of its physical life?

I want to begin where our industry begins: with writers. The world emerging at the start of the 21st century is full of threat to those who create. The desire to commodify all art as some form of entertainment, and the growth of a monoculture based around mass-market tastes and distribution, make many writers feel precarious. In the United Kingdom, the declining price of books is resulting in lower royalties and less range in bookshops. No wonder this prompts writers to wonder about a different model where they are more their own masters, receive fuller recognition for their work and feel less brutalised by the experience. The digital world is presented in such a utopian fashion by its evangelists that it seems to provide an alternative model. While none of us knows exactly how this future will evolve, I believe writers will be best served by continued partnership with publishers, though publishers will have to adapt, too.

Publishers are a bridge between the market and writers. While providing an expert route to creating economic value in the work (ie the author's work is rewarded), they can also act as a sustaining and supporting partner. Thomas Mann, in a tribute to his

publisher Alfred Knopf said:

What a glorious occupation, this mixture of business sense and strategic friendship with the spirit! What a noble way to gain a livelihood! I called it easy, but this was a blunder. I am well aware that in these days the life of a publisher is far from easy. But happy I may certainly call it, in spite of all its difficulties. It must be happy, free from the torture and frailty which all individual creation involves – and yet with an opportunity to serve the spirit.

Many may think this old-fashioned or romantic, but I believe it does capture something of a relationship that is being tested by the market and yet remains of central importance to our industry. The UK market is fiercely competitive and yet boasts one of the most varied general trade publishing ecologies in the world, with several major players, specialist publishers and a number of smaller independents.

The characteristics of our market that encourage publishing diversity include investors who are still prepared to put money into quality publishing to satisfy both cultural and commercial ends, and writers who seek out this model where intimacy with all the publishing disciplines is available (in fact, the focusing of the major publishers' lists has created a windfall of writers available to independent publishers). In the UK we also have a

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ILLUSTRATION BY TOBY MORRISON

thriving media around books, the envy of many other countries, including the US. These publishers invest heavily in publicity. Highly committed and talented publicists work on few books, earning these businesses a reputation for supporting all titles and creating surprise bestsellers. We also have an extraordinary number of places to sell books. Readers who buy a lot of books crave diversity and seek it out.

But where does the idea that artists can reach this market directly come from? The Long Tail, from Chris Anderson's book of the same name, is in danger of becoming a boardroom cliché, but it is a very stimulating idea. The central thesis is that we are entering an age of abundance where the amateur is in a powerful position to make, recommend and comment on the stuff of the world. For writers this suggests that, simply by making your work available, it will be found.

There is much in The Long Tail that is exciting for publishers and writers. But there are aspects to the argument that I don't buy, particularly the transforming nature of the age of abundance. Already people are time-poor, and our battle as publishers is to identify the best writers and then win them a readership. This is tireless work made harder by the rising monoculture. For all their great benefits, one of the effects of Oprah Winfrey's book recommendations in the US, and to some extent Richard & Judy's in the UK, is that they create a migration towards a small number of books. This isn't new, but everyone in the publishing business is experiencing bigger sales when books succeed but smaller beginnings for pretty much everything else.

It seems clear that the age of abundance has already given way to the age of attention, in which the two key attributes of successful publishing businesses will be expertise in how to catch people's attention online and

developing brand identities that reassure consumers that the information, culture or entertainment they are buying comes from a reliable source.

This kind of work is detailed and difficult, and will require a committed investment of time and resources across the range of titles published, plus a strong and authentic brand that will at times be identified beyond the writer.

Perhaps the very biggest authors might be able to do this themselves, and perhaps self-published writers will find a small audience they are happy with, but it seems to me that the vast majority of future publishing, be it books, ebooks, pay-per-view or audio download, will require the publisher's expert marketing skills.

This notion of attention brings us to taste. Taste is central to the age of attention. Publishing is a taste business built intuitively, not scientifically. Out of taste comes the publisher's identity – who and how it publishes, its tone of voice, how its values are perceived through those choices. Many of the online book communities – the evolution of book groups – are ruthless in their assessment of hype. They are gloriously wilful, intelligent and opinionated. Independent publishers usually have a strong editorial voice, and I believe that a defined taste will be a key attribute of publishers who are effective online. Your taste will be more on view, your publishing seen more in context.

Taste does not end at the acquisition of books; it exists in the editorial process that Geoffrey Faber called criticism, revision and initiation. We try to help make the work better. To be a writer's first reader is to reassure them of the quality of the work, but also to engage with them about how it could be

improved. Most writers find this a highly valuable experience. Publishers who do not offer this risk reducing their value to writers. It may not matter that the world will be awash with unedited work, but I believe that edited material will have a higher currency than ever. Wikipedia is without doubt a miracle of the modern world, but I don't think it can be compared to information that has been carefully edited and checked. They are just different animals and will coexist.

Publishers also have a role which is about to become much more urgent: ensuring that authors' copyrighted works are sold and not given away. In the digital age, piracy is becoming a serious issue for copyright creators, a bizarre by-product of a technology-driven revolution that has somehow turned into a new manifesto for freedom and democracy. Removing the artist's right to earn a living from their copyright is nothing short of uncivilised: it is not pioneering and attacks the very heart of the culture of every nation. If we learn one thing from the music industry, it is that only to protect artists' rights is potentially disastrous – you have to create value and engage with the new market.

But it is of equal importance that publishers continue to do everything they currently do, developing businesses that thrive simultaneously in both the physical and digital universes. You can no more detach these two worlds than you can CD and download sales. And it is my belief that we will be publishing physically and electronically together for a long time to come.

Publishers are not book manufacturers, they are about creating businesses from reading.

There will be a revolution in reading around digital technology: there already is in education and academia. But I do not believe that the much-heralded disappearance of the book will happen soon. The history of technology simply doesn't work like that. We will have roll-up books, books on Palm organisers and iPods, mobile phones and PCs. But that is no reason to think that the parallel technology of books on paper will not continue. Also, new technology often reawakens old technology – think of the new audience for radio that has been created by the internet.

The important point for writers and publishers is that it will not be possible to separate these worlds. Online marketing of physical books will have to include the use of content. Content sales online will spin off physical books and vice versa – and this will go on for a long time.

I began with the writer and will end with the reader. Geoffrey Faber closed his 1934 address with an appeal to readers to ignore the market. In an extraordinary outburst he said, "it is the scantiness of an intelligent, sympathetic, discriminating response on the part of the public which compels publishers to cheapen their ideals . . . if you would use your judgment rather than going with the herd, then the face of publishing would be changed".

So it's the reader's fault? Well, I don't think so. I do think that the market and its pressures towards a narrower range of books, though, is a concern for those for whom reading is not a hobby and is crucial for a society and culture that understands the importance of diversity of ideas. The relationship between writer, publisher and reader is symbiotic, and the more this can be at the centre of our publishing thinking, the more we are likely to transform our industry successfully. And, in Thomas Mann's judgment, that will surely make us happy in our work.

Stephen Page is chief executive and publisher of Faber & Faber.