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### The Culture and Commerce of Publishing in the 21st Century (review)

The Culture and Commerce of Publishing in the 21st Century  
by Albert N., Greco, Clara E. Rodriguez, and Robert M. Wharton  
Stanford, Calif.: Stanford UP, 2007

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### Review

While the U.S. book publishing industry has experienced tremendous growth and profound changes since World War II, an age-old question still remains: Is publishing a cultural or commercial endeavor? This conundrum provided Greco, Rodriguez, and Wharton with the impetus to engage in a thorough study of the publishing industry, including the gathering and analysis of enormous amounts of statistical data, an intensive review of the literature, and interviews with individuals involved in all aspects of the business. The collective efforts of the self-described "contributors" (not "authors") to *The Culture and Commerce of Publishing in the 21st Century* have resulted in a work that is rich in information, providing many insights into the industry's economic structure and into the challenges which confront publishers in the commercial marketplace.

Such facility in the analysis of economic data is not surprising, given that Greco and Wharton both serve as consultants for the Book Industry Study Group (BISG), which, according to the group's website ([www.bisg.org](http://www.bisg.org)), is "the U.S. book industry's leading trade association," whose mission is to "gather and analyze accurate, statistical

information about the book market, suppliers and distributors, and current sales to calculate and analyze future industry trends." Indeed, an impressive array of statistics, data sets, tables, and highly-sophisticated econometrics are employed in the book. Yet it appears that amid all this information, the contributors have overlooked a basic element in any book's creation: style. Plagued by sentences that call attention to themselves with poor construction and repetitive structure, paragraphs which "reel off" data, and an unfortunate tendency to over-enumerate and over-summarize, the book at times begins to take on the feel of an elaborate marketing report or—far worse—an extended PowerPoint presentation.

Compounding the stylistic problems, *The Culture and Commerce of Publishing in the 21st Century* suffers from an ambiguous intended audience. A broad overview of the industry points to a general academic audience looking for a simple introduction to the publishing industry; yet the book's extensive use of recondite econometrics points to a more sophisticated audience. Further complicating matters the contributors repeatedly summarize their arguments with such phrases as "We urge industry leaders . . ." as if to suggest they are really addressing members of the established publishing industry.

Notwithstanding these problems, the book does have much to offer. Comprised of three broad sections, each divided into varying numbers of chapters, the book provides a wealth of information and data, particularly as regards economic aspects of the industry. The first of these three sections—accounting for approximately 70% of the book—provides a general overview of the U.S. book publishing industry since 1945, and addresses such important issues as consolidation, changes in distribution channels, the uncertainty of the marketplace, and the profound impact that the emergence of the paperback book has had on both the marketplace and Americans' reading habits. It is in this first section that the book is on its surest footing, employing its statistical analyses, data sets, and tables to explicate the enormous growth the industry has experienced in the post-World War II era, and the effects on the marketplace of the emergence of book "superstores" in the 1980s and the Internet in the 1990s. Of particular interest is the examination of the familiar contention that consolidation, through merger and acquisition, has hurt the industry and resulted in an unfair concentration of power. Using empirical data and econometrics, the contributors' analysis reveals a level of concentration far below what is considered monopolistic, and in terms of title output, ease of entry into the marketplace, and prices, the industry is actually quite healthy.

The book's first section covers an enormous amount of ground, and includes examinations of the insular nature of the book publishing industry and its exclusion of minorities, the industry's organizational structure, the role of book returns, the crisis in scholarly book publishing, and the benefits and drawbacks of digital print-on-demand (POD) technology—among other topics. The contributors' emphasis on statistical data reveals many interesting facts, including these: in 2005, the fourth largest U.S. bookstore chain was Family Christian Stores, with revenues of \$317 million from 308 stores; in 2005, 79% of all new ISBNs in the U.S. sold less than 99

copies; and in 2009, according to the contributors' projections, consumer expenditures on books will reach \$46.5 billion. However, amid this welter of statistics, tables, and numerous profit and loss statements, data fatigue sets in—too often the book relies on numbers to make its arguments and it generally lacks contextualization.

"People in Book Publishing," the book's second section, is divided into two chapters, the first of which examines the racial and gender makeup of people employed in the book publishing industry, the changing demographics of the U.S. population since World War II, the effects such changes have had on book consumption, and the socioeconomic characteristics of book buyers. Not surprisingly, minorities are underrepresented in the industry and, while women constitute 60% of the workforce, men fill the industry's highest positions in disproportionate numbers. And, according to the book, while the Latino and Hispanic populations have surged in the U.S. in the last thirty years, surveys have shown that Latinos and Hispanics read less than African-Americans or Caucasians, and that the amount of time spent reading has decreased for all demographic segments.

The chapter that follows discusses the concerns of those employed in the industry in regards to such changes as consolidation, declines in reading among the general population, and the increasing emphasis on profitability of the books published, often at the expense of quality. Two topics covered in this chapter are particularly worthy of note: first, the effect that the lack of minorities in the industry has on the ability of members of minority groups to get their books published; and second, the slow response of the U.S. publishing industry to the great increase in the Latino and Hispanic populations, and the lack of understanding in the industry of how to meet the needs of this segment of the U.S. population.

Appropriately, the book's final section—comprised of one chapter totaling seven pages—takes a look toward the future, examining the strategies necessary for the expansion of the market for books, and the effects the Internet and emerging technologies will have on both sales and copyright. The contributors envision a tight market for new books, and foresee a continued increase in used book sales—not necessarily good news for the U.S. publishing industry. The discussion of technology's impact on publishing is, quite frankly, disappointing—consisting only of a review of the literature on the subject, and failing to tie the disparate threads into a coherent whole. This sense of disappointment is exacerbated by the ambivalence and lack of imagination embodied in the book's final sentence: "The game changed in the summer of 1995 when Jeff Bazos opened Amazon.com; we just do not know whether the game changed for better or worse."

While *The Culture and Commerce of Publishing in the 21st Century* provides an enormous amount of data on the U.S. publishing industry and covers a wide range of topics, the editing was insufficient. That a well-respected academic press would publish a work with shortcomings of such a fundamental nature leads this reviewer to conclude that the oft-spoken of crisis in scholarly publishing is very real indeed.

**Reviewer's Bio**

Barry is a library assistant in the Electronic Reserves department at the University of Rochester's Rush Rhees Library, and in his final semester at the Master of Library Science program at the University at Buffalo, focusing on Special Collections Librarianship.