



Comunicación y Sociedad

ISSN: 0188-252X

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Universidad de Guadalajara

México

Books and culture in the digital age  
Comunicación y Sociedad, núm. 27, septiembre-diciembre, 2016, pp. 243-265  
Universidad de Guadalajara  
Zapopan, México

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## ***Books and culture in the digital age*<sup>1</sup>**

**Libros y cultura en la era digital.**

**Entrevista a John B. Thompson<sup>2</sup>**

John B. Thompson, sociólogo, es profesor en la Universidad de Cambridge y Fellow del Jesus College. Cuenta con una gran cantidad de artículos y libros publicados, traducidos a varias lenguas. Entre sus obras más reconocidas se encuentran: *Media and Modernity* (1995), *Ideology and Modern Culture* (1991), y *Political Scandal. Power and Visibility in the Media Age* (2000).

En los últimos años se ha dedicado a investigar sobre las transformaciones en la industria editorial anglosajona (Estados Unidos y Gran Bretaña), tanto para publicaciones académicas como comerciales en el contexto de la revolución digital. Estos cambios afectan también a otras industrias editoriales del mundo, cada vez más globalizado. Es por ello que en *Comunicación y Sociedad* consideramos pertinente publicar esta colaboración para comprender las transformaciones que enfrenta la industria cultural, en particular, la editorial.

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this interview was published by *Parágrafo* journal (Brazil), on August 2016. *Comunicación y Sociedad* contributes to present a more extensive interview.

<sup>2</sup> Professor at Jesus College, Cambridge University, England.

1. In your last book, *Merchants of Culture*, you suggest that a comparative and transnational perspective is a crucial condition to the study of cultural industries in a globalized world. Can you tell us what the methodological challenges and analytical benefits of this perspective were for understanding the field of trade publishing in the UK and the US? Considering that many other scholars dedicated to studying the publishing field (Sapiro, Heilbron, Casanova, Mollier, Sorá) have adopted similar research designs, do you think that the transnational scale is on the way to replacing the national scale in this area of studies?

In recent decades, many industries, including the media and cultural industries, have operated increasingly on a transnational, indeed global, scale. There is nothing new about this: in early modern Europe, many industries, including the nascent book industry, were operating across borders. But there is no doubt that the scale of this transnational activity has expanded greatly in recent decades and the nature of this activity has both changed and intensified, partly as a result of the digital revolution and the rise of the Internet. No one working on the media and cultural industries today can ignore this transnational dimension –and this is especially true if you’re working on media and cultural industries that operate in the English language, since English has become *de facto* the global language and content produced in English will have an audience that extends, at least potentially, well beyond the borders of any particular nation-state.

The methodological challenges this poses for the researcher will vary from industry to industry and language to language, since each industry operating in a particular language has adapted in its own ways to processes of globalization and the digital revolution. For me, dealing with the world of English-language trade publishing, it meant that, at the very least, I had to look at both the US and the UK: these two countries together comprise what one could think of as the heartland of English-language trade publishing. Nearly all of the largest publishers in English-language trade publishing have a major presence in both countries and many authors and books are published in both markets –it would be limited and artificial to study one of these countries on its own. So this was the first methodological challenge: it’s very difficult

to do empirical research on one industry in one country, it's twice as difficult to do it in two countries.

I was also very conscious of the fact that, in focusing on the US and the UK, I was ignoring many other countries and markets that operate in the English language –Canada, Australia, Ireland, South Africa, to name just a few. These markets– or ‘national fields’, as I would call them –are linked in complex ways with the US and the UK, relationships that are shaped by the long history of imperial expansion and retraction and by the enormous power of large media conglomerates today, and at the same time they have a degree of autonomy that is rooted in their own distinctive histories and cultures. It would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to try to deal with all of this complexity in one research project, let alone one book. So the narrowing of my focus to the US and the UK was a methodological decision based on my view –justifiable in empirical and historical terms– that the US and the UK are the two most important countries for the production of trade books in the English-speaking world today.

So is the transnational scale displacing the national scale in the study of media and cultural industries? In my opinion it should be: I don't think you can do justice to the way that these industries work today if you adopt a national view and study the industry in one country only. These industries are simply too transnational today to justify an exclusively national focus, and many large corporations operate in many different countries and many different languages. Having said that, much of the research that is done on media and cultural industries remains national in scope, partly because it is very difficult in practice to do the kind of transnational research that I've described here –the authors you mention above are more the exception than the rule. So while a transnational scale may be highly desirable on intellectual grounds, I wouldn't go so far as to say that it is actually displacing the national scale.

2. Apart from the need to adopt a transnational perspective, what have been the biggest challenges you have faced in your research on the publishing industry and how did you solve them?

There are many challenges involved in doing large-scale comparative research of this kind –that's partly what makes it so interesting and,

at the same time, so difficult to do well. Let me focus here on three. The first challenge— in some ways, the most fundamental —is trying to find out what is really going on. There is no shortage of accounts of what is supposedly happening in the world of book publishing: like all media industries, book publishing exerts a certain fascination, it has a glamour (albeit less than television and the movie business) that attracts the attention of journalists and other commentators, and they are constantly writing about what they think is happening in the industry and where it is going. But for the most part, these journalistic accounts are more speculation and opinion than fact. They are based on a very limited understanding —often drawn from second-hand accounts or casual conversations with insiders— of what is actually happening in the world they are purporting to describe. The challenge for me as a sociologist was to dig beneath this rather superficial level of journalistic speculation and try to find out how the world of publishing really works and how it is changing. To do this, you need to immerse yourself in the world of publishing for an extended period of time, go inside organizations and talk to the people who work in them and watch what they do —you can't do this from your desk. Fieldwork of this kind is very time-consuming and it's not easy to get the information you need. People are often happy to talk to you, but will they tell you what you really want to know? How do you get people who work for organizations to tell you openly and honestly what really goes on in those organizations and what they really think about it all? It's not easy. People are often inclined to tell you what they want you to believe rather than what they know, or what they really think. You hear lots of organization-speak —especially from senior managers who want to present a rosy image of their firm and have no interest in sharing uncomfortable truths. So how do you cut through the PR hype? How do you get people to talk openly and honestly about a world they know from the inside, to describe this world without constantly painting it in the colours they want you to see? That's the art of interviewing—a greatly underestimated art, in my view. You have to build relations of trust with your interviewees over an extended period of time, get to know them and learn how to interpret what they say, and if you suspect you're being fed a line, you have to know how to ask just the right question that will gently disarm your

interviewee without challenging him or disrupting the delicate relations of trust that you've worked so hard to build up. Good interviewing is not so much a method as a skill or a craft that you learn by doing; you get better and better at it the more you do, though in my experience you never feel like you've completely mastered the art.

The second big challenge is to figure out what to do with all the material you gather through your interviews and fieldwork once you've got it. For each of the two books I've written on the book industry – *Books in the Digital Age* (2005), which dealt with the transformation of academic publishing, and *Merchants of Culture* (2010), which dealt with the transformation of trade publishing – I did around 250 interviews, amounting to some 500 hours of recording: this, combined with extensive field notes as well as a great deal of empirical data, is a vast amount of material. What do you do with all this? How do you use it to try to make sense of these complex and messy worlds of publishing? The metaphor that often occurred to me was the jigsaw puzzle: it felt like I was looking at a large pile of pieces from a jigsaw puzzle scattered about on the floor, not knowing what the puzzle is a picture of or even whether the pieces in front of you make up a picture at all. Perhaps they don't. Perhaps there is no order in this world – perhaps it's just lots of different people in lots of different organizations doing lots of different things, and all you can do as a social scientist is describe all the different things they do. Is that it? If so, then the social science of a cultural field like publishing could never be anything other than a detailed description of it, a description of what the many actors in this field do as they go about their day-to-day activities. I recognized that this was a possibility but my work was based on the assumption that this was probably wrong. My assumption was that if you fiddled around with the pieces of the puzzle long enough and looked at them from different angles, you would eventually be able to see how they fit together, you would be able to discern some order in the chaos, some structure in the flux. So that was my challenge: to find some structure in the flux. And I found it, or at least I claim to have found it: this is what I call "the logic of the field". So my analysis of each publishing field, whether it's the field of scholarly book publishing or the field of higher education publishing or the field of trade publishing, is characterized by a certain dynamic that I call the logic of the field

– and it’s vital to see that this logic is different for each publishing field. Reconstructing this logic enables us to identify the forces and processes that are most important in shaping the evolution of the field; it enables us to separate the essential from the inessential, the things that matter most from the things that matter less. Reconstructing the logic helps us to make sense of a messy world but it also does more: it enables us to explain why the actors and organizations that inhabit this world act as they do. In other words, the logic of the field has explanatory value. To figure out what the logic of the field was for each particular field of publishing that I studied, indeed to claim that there was more to the social science of a cultural field than a description of what actors and organizations do and to make good on that claim, was a major methodological challenge – and hopefully one that readers will feel that I have addressed with at least some degree of plausibility.

A third challenge is that the subject matter itself is constantly changing. Of course, this is true for anyone working on a present-day industry: it’s always going to be like shooting at a moving target, and as soon as you finish writing a text your subject matter will have moved on. But in the case of the book publishing industry in the period between 2000 and 2015, the problem of obsolescence was particularly acute. To a large extent, this was due to the transformative impact of the digital revolution. The digital revolution first began to make itself felt in the publishing industry in the 1980s, transforming back-office systems and supply chains; but as with other sectors of the creative industries, the impact of the digital revolution in publishing was always going to be much more profound and pervasive than this. The reason is simple: like the output of other creative industries, what the publishing industry produces is a digitizable asset –that is, symbolic content that can be codified in a digital form. This is why publishing and other creative industries are very different from industries that produce physical objects like, say, cars or refrigerators. Superficially, the publishing industry appears to produce physical objects too– namely, printed books made of paper, ink and glue. But the physical nature of the book is just a contingent feature of books as they have been produced over the last 500 years, not a necessary feature of the book as such. What the publishing industry is really producing is symbolic content: the print-on-paper book is just

an historically contingent form in which the symbolic content can be realized. At the most fundamental level, what digitization does is enable the symbolic content to be separated from the material form in which it has traditionally been realized. And if the content is separated from the form and turned into a digital code, then the need to embed the content in a particular material substratum like print-on-paper disappears—at least in principle.

Once the publishing industry came to terms with the fact that its principal output was a digitizable asset, things began to change very quickly. The changes first appeared in the sphere of production, starting with the creative process itself: authors began to compose their texts directly on computers, rather than writing on paper or using a typewriter, so that the text became a digital file from the moment of creation. The book was no longer a book, or no longer what we customarily thought of as a book: it was a database, a sequence of 0s and 1s that existed only in the memory of a computer. The various phases of the production process were also transformed, as production itself became a matter of manipulating, revising and adding new layers of code to the digital file created by the author. But the digital revolution was also a communication revolution that opened up the possibility of delivering digital content to consumers in new ways, dispensing with the need to embed this content in traditional media like the print-on-paper book, and indeed it opened the even more radical possibility of creating entirely new channels of communication between creators and consumers, or between large numbers of individuals who were simultaneously creators and consumers, bypassing the traditional intermediaries—publishers, agents, booksellers, etc.—that had previously enabled this process of communication and symbolic exchange to take place. Suddenly the publishing industry found itself staring over the edge of a cliff.

This is the context in which I set out to study the transformation of the publishing industry: it was a context in which a profound technological revolution was disrupting the oldest of our media industries, one that had remained pretty much unchanged in terms of its basic principles and modes of operation since Gutenberg invented the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century but that was now faced with the very real possibility of annihilation. It was a time of feverish experimen-



tation as countless new players entered the industry, often backed by ludicrous amounts of venture capital, and as traditional players tried to shore up their positions and avoid disintermediation by innovating as energetically as their new cash-rich competitors. In the early 2000s the book publishing industry found itself living through a revolution, and I, as a sociologist who happened to be working on the industry at this time, found myself trying to make sense of a revolution as it occurred, *in medias res*. I was lucky: how often does an academic researcher have the opportunity to chronicle a revolution as it occurs? Suddenly the old world of book publishing was now at the centre of a revolution that was tearing through the creative industries, disrupting traditional practices and transforming the ways in which we create and communicate with one another, and I had the good fortune to have a ring-side seat. It was almost too good to be true. And yet there was a price to pay for this stroke of good fortune: it was impossible to write about this industry without facing the problem of immediate obsolescence. I knew that what I wrote would date very quickly, simply because so many things were in flux. There was really no way around this problem but I tried to minimize the risks by focusing on the underlying trends, updating when I had a chance and avoiding speculation about the future. The publishing industry was living through a revolution of sorts, and one of the few things you can say for certain about a revolution is that when you're in the middle of one, you have no idea where and when it will end.

3. On the basis of the research you have done so far, is it possible to say whether the effects of these technological changes on the book industry will be as dramatic as the effects on the music industry? Which research horizons and which professional challenges could you highlight considering the changes so far?

Both *Books in the Digital Age* and *Merchants of Culture* dealt in some detail with the impact of the digital revolution on the book publishing industry and I am currently working on a new book that is focused entirely on this issue, so the issues are very much in my mind. There is no doubt that the digital revolution is having an enormous impact on this industry – the surge in ebook sales that has occurred since 2008 is only the most visible manifestation of a transformation that runs

deep and has affected every aspect of the business. But we should not assume that what happened in some other sector of the media industries, like the music industry, will also happen in books. Many commentators are inclined to see the music industry as the future of the book foretold, but that, in my view, would be a mistake. These are very different industries, and books are very different kinds of symbolic goods from songs and LPs. The ways that people read books and use books, why they read them, how they read them and what they value them for, have very little in common with the ways that people listen to music. We should not assume that there is a single model of how the digital revolution will transform the creative industries and that every sector of the creative industries –from music to television, from newspapers to books– will experience a similar process of change. We need to look carefully at each sector in its own right, and that is what I'm doing in my new research on the digital revolution in trade publishing.

I don't have the space to discuss the results of this new research in detail here but let me comment briefly on one salient consideration. If we look carefully at the data for the US, where the sales of ebooks have been strongest, we see that there was a dramatic surge in ebook sales in the period from 2008 to 2012: in 2008 ebook sales represented just 0.5 per cent of overall trade sales, but by 2012 this share had risen to 20 per cent. That was staggering growth in just four years. At that time, there were many in the industry who believed –in some cases, feared– that ebooks would continue to soar and would soon account for 50 per cent or more of all trade book sales. The implications of that for an industry that had been based traditionally on the production and sale of physical stock would be enormous – and every bit as tumultuous as the shift from vinyl to digital in the music industry. But then in 2013 something equally dramatic happened: the growth of ebooks stopped. Just like that. Few commentators expected it but there you are: the world doesn't obey the predictions of the commentators.

In fact, if you dig deeper into the data, you see that the picture is more complicated than the picture I've just sketched would suggest. If you look carefully you see that the patterns vary greatly by type of book. At one extreme you have romance fiction and other kinds of genre fiction, like mystery, science fiction and fantasy: for these kinds of books,

sales of ebooks were accounting for as much as 50-60 per cent of total sales by 2012. At the other end of the scale, some nonfiction categories, like cookbooks, travel books and juvenile nonfiction, ebooks accounted for less than 10 per cent of sales. Narrative nonfiction, like history, biography and autobiography, were somewhere in between, between 15 and 25 per cent. So there is enormous variation in the extent of ebook uptake – it varies greatly from one category of book to another. But in all cases, we see a certain levelling off of ebook sales in 2013 and 2014.

It's too early to say whether the levelling-off of ebook sales that we've seen since 2012 will continue in the coming years – the truth is, we simply don't know. We're still at the early stages of the digital revolution and we really have no idea how this revolution is going to unfold in the years to come. Nevertheless, the data do tend to suggest that some of the more dramatic claims about the transformative impact of the ebook revolution may have been overstated. My argument, based on this kind of data, is that what we're seeing in the world of trade publishing is not so much the invention of a new *form* of the book, as some of the more radical proponents of the ebook revolution promised, but rather the creation of a new *format* for the book. There's nothing new about new book formats – new formats were invented often enough in the past. Allen Lane's launching of cheap Penguin paperbacks in the 1930s was one example, and the subsequent development of the trade paperback and mass-market paperback formats were similarly important developments. To characterize ebooks as a new format is not to downplay their significance: ebooks have had already, and will continue to have, major implications for the book publishing industry and for the players within it. But it is nowhere near as disruptive as it might have been – or might still be – if the very form of the book were being reinvented.

4. In the book *The Media and Modernity*, published in 1995, you put forward a “regulated pluralism” model for the media industries, in order to ensure a plurality of media institutions which corresponds to the plurality of political positions. Do you think this model could or should be applied to the book publishing industry? How can plurality and diversity be protected in a market that is more and more concentrated?

I do believe that the model of regulated pluralism should be applied to the book publishing industry, just as it should be applied to other sectors of the media industries. In some ways, the book publishing industry is in better position than other media industries in this regard, since the entry costs are much lower than they are in other industries – and they have been lowered still further by the digital revolution, which has greatly reduced the costs involved in publishing books. There have always been many small publishers, and the culture of the small indie presses remains vibrant today. Moreover, the explosion of self-publishing has made it easier than ever for individuals to publish books: it is now as easy as uploading a file. But despite these trends, there are two very important ways in which the book industry can be endangered by processes of corporate concentration.

In the first place, large publishing corporations, themselves owned by large transnational and multimedia conglomerates, have bought up many formerly independent publishing houses, leading to what I call the “polarization of the field” of Anglo-American trade publishing. What I mean by this is that there are now a small number of very large corporations and a large number of very small players, but very little in between: being medium-sized is the hardest place to be. Most medium-sized publishers have been bought up by the large corporations, and there are strong pressures for further consolidation among the large houses. The result is likely to be the increasing concentration of publishing resources in the hands of a dwindling number of large corporations. With the recent merger of Penguin and Random House, the “Big Six” publishing houses that dominated Anglo-American trade publishing during the last few decades was reduced to five and the trend towards further consolidation is unlikely to stop there.

The second danger is the growing concentration in the retail sector, and in particular the growing power of Amazon in the retail marketplace for books. In the 1980s and 1990s, power in the retail marketplace for books was concentrated in the hands of the book superstore chains – above all, Barnes & Noble and Borders in the US and Waterstones in the UK. But with the growth of Amazon in the late 1990s and early 2000s, retail power shifted decisively to the online retailer. By 2014 Amazon was accounting for over 40 per cent of all new book unit sales

in the US, print and digital, and around 67 per cent of all ebook sales. By contrast, Borders collapsed in 2011 and Barnes & Noble has struggled to cope with declining sales in both print and digital. The bankruptcy of Borders in 2011 marked the end of an era, in the sense that the age dominated by the big retail chains, rolling out their superstores across America, is now definitively over. We've entered a new era when those retail chains that remain are in a much weaker position and where Amazon has become the main retail power in the book industry.

In what sense do these two developments represent threats to plurality and diversity in the book industry? There are some people who argue that the growing concentration of publishing power in the hands of a small number of large publishing corporations is itself a threat to diversity, since there are strong pressures within these corporations to focus on "big books" and to take fewer chances with new authors and so-called "mid-list" titles. There is some truth to this view: the consolidation of publishing houses does reduce the range of options for authors who are hoping not simply to publish their book, but also to secure the kind of advance that would support them while they write. But at the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that there has been an enormous increase in the number of books published each year – the number of titles published in the US increased by more than six-fold between 1980 and 2010, and with the explosion of self-publishing, the numbers have increased exponentially since then. In these circumstances, it would be hard to argue that our culture is suffering from a dangerous constriction in the number and variety of published books.

On the other hand, it is clear that there are powerful forces that are skewing the book market in certain ways, and these forces can operate in ways that are inimical both to readers and to writers. In my work I distinguish between two kinds of diversity: "diversity of output" and "diversity in the marketplace". The problem we face today is not so much about output, that is, about what gets published – given the ease of self-publishing, you can publish almost anything today. Rather, the problem today is about what gets noticed, purchased and read. We live in a world where it is attention, not content, that is scarce. And here the power of large corporations plays a crucial role: large corporations have the power to make some books much more visible than others.

What we see happening is that, despite the huge number of new books that are published every year, only a small proportion of these books get selected out, promoted and displayed in the most visible spaces in the marketplace. We also find that a smaller and smaller number of best-sellers account for a growing proportion of overall sales – books like Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series and E. L. James' *Fifty Shades* trilogy. It's not exactly a winner-takes-all market, but it is what we could call a winner-takes-more market, and most of the books that win are published by the large corporations. The large publishing corporations may no longer have the gatekeeping power they once did but their market-making power remains as important as ever.

The other powerful force that skews the market is Amazon. Of course, from the consumer's point of view, Amazon is great: never before have consumers had such easy access to an enormous range of books, both new and used, and the ability to order them with a single click. But this convenience comes at a price: as Amazon grows more dominant, it uses its power to squeeze its suppliers and to try to wrest better and better terms from publishers. If publishers are not willing to comply, Amazon has shown its willingness to apply sanctions that could only be described as punitive, as in its now-famous disputes with Macmillan in 2010 and Hachette in 2014.

Few would deny that Amazon is now the dominant player in the retail marketplace for books; the question is whether it abuses this power in ways that might work against diversity and pluralism. There is no real evidence to support the view that Amazon operates like a classic monopoly, exploiting its dominant market position by raising prices to consumers – on the contrary, it has made a point of keeping its prices to consumers low, often discounting in ways that undercut other retailers. But it could be argued that Amazon is acting more and more like a monopsony, using its market power to squeeze its suppliers and drive down the prices it pays for books. Given that Amazon now accounts for as much as half of the sales of many publishing companies, it has the power to cripple a company, and seriously to damage the sales of the books they publish and the livelihoods of the authors who write them, by simply turning off the buy buttons if the publisher will not agree to their terms – a draconian move that Amazon has been willing on occasion to use.

My own view is that the case for regulating the book market is as strong today as it ever was. The two forces described here – the growing consolidation of publishing houses and the growing power of Amazon – are skewing the market in ways that work against the cultivation of a diverse and flourishing book culture. A diverse and flourishing book culture requires a diverse industry in which there are many pathways into the market and a plurality of retailers operating independently of one another, so that power is not concentrated in the hands of a small number of dominant players who have the power to restrict access or to squeeze suppliers excessively, to the point where some may be driven out of business – an outcome that would benefit neither authors nor readers. It also requires a marketplace in which the power to get books noticed, purchased and read is dispersed among a plurality of players, so that large corporations – whether these are publishers or retailers – do not have undue influence in determining the books to which we as readers are exposed. One mechanism that has been used in some countries to encourage and protect diversity in the marketplace for books is fixed prices, which limits the ability of large retailers to undercut smaller retailers by aggressive discounting. While fixed-price regimes work well in some countries, it is very unlikely that this mechanism would be adopted now in the US or the UK – the liberal, free-market culture of these countries would almost certainly kill any attempt to introduce legislation of this kind. In my view, the best way to regulate this industry in the Anglo-American world is to look again at antitrust law and at the ways in which the competition authorities and the courts interpret it. Processes of consolidation have a tendency to produce large concentrations of power that skew markets in ways that benefit corporations and work against the interests of individuals, which in this context means both readers and writers, and those who are responsible for scrutinizing these processes have a responsibility to ensure that power is not and cannot be wielded in this way.

5. What do you see as the most important challenges facing the book publishing industry in the next few years?

We have already touched on two key challenges: riding the juggernaut of the digital revolution, and maintaining a diverse and flourish-

ing book culture in the face of powerful forces of consolidation. These two challenges, rooted in developments that are themselves interwoven in complex ways (the most powerful player in the retail marketplace for books, Amazon, is itself a product of the digital revolution), are probably the most important challenges facing the book publishing industry in the next few years – or at least that sector of the book publishing industry that I'm calling Anglo-American trade publishing. The challenges facing other sectors of the book publishing industry, and facing the publishing industries operating in other languages and in other countries, may differ in some respects, although I think it's very likely that they too will face the challenges posed by the digital revolution and growing consolidation.

There are, of course, numerous other challenges confronting the publishing industry apart from these two, although many of the other challenges are part of, or linked to, the challenges we've already discussed. Here let me briefly mention another two. In the first place, there is the problem of price deflation – the constant downward pressure on prices. This pressure stems from the two developments we've discussed. One of the characteristics of a digital economy is that, while information may be very costly to produce, the marginal cost of reproduction is close to zero – you can make a copy of a file for nothing, provided you've got the right equipment. This exacerbates the problem of piracy and copyright infringement – another very real problem for the publishing industry, though I won't discuss it here. It also means that information can be used by retail and technology companies as a way to increase their market share and strengthen their positions vis-à-vis their competitors – in other words, information becomes cannon fodder in struggles between players who are seeking to become dominant in their domains. So there is intense downward pressure on the prices of information and symbolic content online: information and symbolic content is used as a way to achieve ever-greater scale and gather more and more user-data, and the cheaper this information is (even to the point of being free), the more effective it is for achieving these goals. This produces a deep structural conflict between information and content producers, on the one hand, and network players, on the other. For network players, informa-



tion and symbolic content are a means to an end, which is to get big fast and to become a dominant player in the field, or at least sufficiently dominant to command a significant degree of attention. But for information and content producers, information and symbolic content are ends in themselves, something that takes time, effort and creativity to produce and is to be valued in and for itself. The protracted struggles between the large technology companies and retailers like Google and Amazon, on the one hand, and publishers, on the other, can be largely explained in terms of this structural conflict.

Faced with this conflict, most publishers have taken the view that they should try to keep control of the pricing of their digital content so that it cannot be sold or supplied very cheaply by large technology companies and retailers. Why should publishers care if large technology companies and retailers want to sell publishers' content cheaply or give it away for free, provided that these companies and retailers are willing to pay the publishers for this content and absorb the losses themselves? Publishers are understandably worried about this for three reasons: first, it would drive down the perceived value of publishers' content, in exactly the same way that Apple's pricing of songs at 99¢ drove down the perceived value of the song. Second, it would drive other retailers out of the market, especially those booksellers who depended on the sale of physical books, thus strengthening the position of Amazon, who could then use its increasingly monopolistic position to demand better terms of trade from publishers, thereby squeezing their margins further. And third, it could lead to a haemorrhaging of value out of the industry, as prices are driven down but unit sales are not increased sufficiently to compensate for the lower prices. The market for books may be less elastic than the advocates of lower prices believe. Overall revenues would fall and the amount of money available to compensate the creatives in the value chain, including authors, would decline. Having lost control of pricing, publishers would also lose the ability to determine the value of the content they were producing and power would shift decisively in favour of the large technology companies and retailers. This is why the struggle between the publishers and Amazon over what is known as "agency pricing" was so important for the industry. It was not handled

well by the publishers, who, together with Apple, were sued by the Department of Justice for conspiracy to fix prices. But the publishers were undoubtedly right to see that the issue of ebook pricing was the Trojan horse that led to a gradual decline of the publishing industry, draining value out of the content-creation process and making it harder and harder to generate the kind of revenue you need to nourish creativity and produce work of quality on a long-term sustainable basis.

A second major challenge facing the publishing industry is much broader in character: the digital revolution is not only disrupting industries like publishing, it is also transforming our social, political and cultural life in a much broader sense. The ways that people interact with one another, the ways that they gather information and learn about the world beyond their immediate locale, the ways that they entertain themselves and spend their leisure time – all of these things are changing today, as individuals rely more and more on the networks they can access via their electronic devices and especially their mobile phones. What role do books play, and what role will they play, in this brave new world of digitized information and globalized networks, where we have continuous access to immense quantities of content that are richly audio-visual in character and where we become accustomed to moving quickly from one form of content to another, seldom dwelling for long on any site or page? This is the new information ecology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in which books, if they are to survive, must find their place. It is no longer the same world as the world in which our parents and grandparents lived, it is a world in which the symbolic parameters have changed fundamentally. The real challenge facing the publishing industry today, the challenge that surpasses all others in terms of the risks it poses for the industry and its future, is to understand the new information ecology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to grasp the direction in which it is moving and to do what it can to ensure that the particular form of story-telling and extended reflection that we call “the book” continues to have a home in this world.

6. In the book *Political Scandal*, you analyse the “new visibility” created by media and examine its consequences for the political world. Now, how do you see the everyday interactions of “ordinary men” in the Internet? And how do you see the political uses of the Internet?

When I introduced the notion of “the new visibility”, I wanted to focus attention on what seemed to me to be a fundamental but neglected feature of the modern world – namely, the ways in which our perception of the world, and of others within the world, has been transformed by the development of communication media. In the normal flow of our daily lives, what is “visible” to us – that is, what we can see – is linked to the physical capacities of our sense of sight and to the spatial and temporal properties of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We cannot see beyond a certain distance, unless aided by a technical device of some kind; we cannot see in the absence of a certain amount of light, unless aided, again, by a technical device; and we cannot see into the future or the past. What we see is that which lies within our field of vision, where the boundaries of this field are shaped by the spatial and temporal properties of the here and now. Ordinary visibility is always situated: the others who are visible to us are those who share the same spatial-temporal locale. Visibility is also reciprocal (at least in principle): we can see others who are within our field of vision, but they can also see us (provided that we are not concealed in some way). I call this “the situated visibility of co-presence”.

But with the development of communication media, beginning with print in early modern Europe and continuing with the electronic media in the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, visibility is freed from the spatial and temporal properties of the here and now. The visibility of individuals, actions and events is severed from the sharing of a common locale – this is what I call the new “mediated visibility”. One no longer has to be present in the same spatial-temporal setting in order to see the other individual or to witness the action or event. The field of vision is stretched out in space and possibly also in time: we can witness events occurring in distant places “live”, as they occur in real time; we can also witness distant events which occurred in the past and which can be re-presented in the present. Moreover, this new form of mediated visibility is no longer reciprocal in character. The field of vision is uni-directional: the viewer can see the distant others who are being filmed or photographed or represented in some way but the distant others cannot, in most circumstances, see them.

In my work I try to show that the rise of mediated visibility had profound implications for the exercise of political power. Prior to the development of print and other media, the most powerful rulers were invisible to most people – they were simply never seen. They were visible only to a small circle of others with whom they interacted in the relatively closed circles of the assembly or the court. But with the development of print and electronic media, political rulers acquired a new kind of visibility that was detached from their physical appearances before assembled audiences. This new visibility was both a source of power and a source of fragility: a source of power because it enabled rulers to speak directly to millions of citizens and to cultivate a new kind of relationship with the people over whom they ruled and whose support they needed from time to time. But it was also a source of fragility in the sense that rulers could also appear as incompetent or corrupt, and could find that their actions were portrayed in an unflattering light. This is the basis of the modern phenomenon of scandal. What we think of today as “scandal” is a phenomenon that emerged only in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as part and parcel of the rise of mediated visibility. Scandal involved the disclosure through the media of some action or activity which was previously hidden from view, which involved the transgression of certain values and norms and which, on being disclosed, elicited public expressions of disapproval and outrage. Activities that were carried out secretly or in privacy were suddenly made visible in the public domain, and the disclosure and condemnation of these activities in the press served in part to constitute the event as a scandal. We can understand why scandals have become a pervasive feature of our societies today only by seeing that they are rooted in a fundamental transformation in the nature of visibility that is linked to the development of the media.

The rise of the Internet since the 1990s has deepened and extended this transformation. On the one hand, the Internet has created a much more complex information environment, a ramified network in which the points of access are radically dispersed, so it is much more difficult for those in established positions of power – whether these are in political institutions or in traditional media institutions – to control the information that is made available in the public domain. Individuals can post comments on a blog or upload sensitive information to a web-

site without having to go through traditional gatekeepers: we need look no further than Wikileaks to see the disruptive political consequences of this radical dispersion of access brought about by the Internet. On the other hand, the Internet has also made it possible for many different kinds of actors –indeed, for anyone with access to the Internet– to achieve a form of mediated visibility. This means that we all now face the task that was once the preserve of political rulers and others with privileged access to the media – namely, the task of managing our visibility and self-presentation in the mediated arenas of modern life. Anyone with a website or a blog or a profile on Facebook or other social media now has a mediated presence: they are visible to others online, and the details they give about themselves, the images they post and the things they write, take on a life of their own. They acquire a kind of reality that is no longer tied to the spatial and temporal contexts of everyday life: they transcend these contexts, become instantly available to others widely dispersed in space and time, acquire a permanence that cannot be easily erased and may, at some distant point in time, come back to haunt you.

We have yet fully to grasp the far-reaching consequences of this radical deepening and extension of the transformation of visibility brought about by the digital revolution. While the phenomenon of mediated visibility has been with us since the advent of print, there is no doubt that the digital revolution has given this phenomenon a new salience and pervasiveness for us today. We now live in an age of high media visibility, which means that social and political life now unfolds in an information environment where the capacity to reveal and conceal, to make things visible and prevent others from doing so, are much more widely dispersed and difficult to control. Anyone with access to the Internet can now make things visible to millions of others in an arena that is highly porous and permanently unstable, an arena in which traditional power holders can no longer control the agenda and in which leaks, revelations and disclosures are always capable of disrupting the most well-laid plans. This is a world in which old structures have become much more fragile and in which new forces can suddenly appear, mobilized and coordinated by forms of communication and information flow that largely bypass traditional power structures. This is the

new world in which all of us have to learn to live today, politicians and citizens alike, and it is also the world that we as social analysts have to try, as best we can, to understand.

7. In a world that is increasingly complex, multimodal and with so many technological advances, what do you think of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of media, ideology and power?

In my view, it was always essential to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to the study of media, ideology and power: we are dealing here with a sphere of social life in which meaning is interwoven with technology, power and social structure, and to make sense of what happens in this sphere requires us to adopt methods that are tailored to the distinctive properties of the subject matter. So there is nothing new about the need to adopt an interdisciplinary approach. But many things are new about the situation in which we find ourselves today, and some of these do have implications for the kind of interdisciplinarity we need to develop. Let me briefly comment on two.

In the first place, the digital revolution is eroding the traditional boundaries between media sectors and blurring the traditional distinctions between producers and consumers of media content. For many individuals, the world in which they live today is one in which the flow of information and communication is no longer shaped by traditional media players but is increasingly shaped by the new players and new platforms that structure the online environment, an environment in which individuals constantly juggle different media, different platforms and different messages in the course of their day-to-day lives, actively participating in some, monitoring some with varying degrees of attention and ignoring others. Understanding this world requires a new kind of interdisciplinary flexibility, one that is sensitive to the new forms of experience and meaning-making that are part and parcel of the new life-worlds of individuals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and attentive to the new forms of corporate power and the technologies that are shaping this world. And in my view, this calls for a new kind of collaboration between social scientists, on the one hand, and computer scientists, on the other. This kind of collaboration has not been common in the study of media and communications hitherto. For the most part, when

scholars call for interdisciplinarity in the study of media and communications, they usually mean collaboration between researchers who focus on institutions and social structures, like sociologists and political economists of the media, on the one hand, and those who adopt a more interpretative approach, drawing their methods from ethnography or even from literary studies. Interdisciplinarity of this kind is important and it remains essential, but in the wake of the digital revolution it is no longer sufficient. More than ever, we need a new kind of interdisciplinarity that brings together social scientists and computer scientists. How can we understand, for example, the ways in which the algorithms developed by large technology companies shape our experience in the online world without knowing how these algorithms work? On the other hand, understanding technologies also requires us to understand the social, political and economic contexts in which these technologies are created and deployed. To understand how our world is changing today we need to understand both the technologies involved and the social, political and economic contexts and processes in which these technologies are embedded and of which they are part.

There is a second aspect of the digital revolution that has important implications for interdisciplinarity. Although it's common to think of the digital revolution in terms of media, since our rapidly changing forms of communication are the most obvious manifestation of it, in fact this revolution is much deeper and more pervasive than this focus on media would suggest – indeed it affects all aspects of social and political life. This means that traditional academic disciplines like sociology and politics cannot ignore the transformative impact of the digital revolution but must open themselves to the kind of interdisciplinary collaboration that will enable us to understand this revolution and its far-reaching implications. Our ways of interacting with one another are changing, as are our ways of organizing our lives, monitoring our lives, relating to those in power and understanding what they do. Also changing are the ways in which those who have power, both political and economic, are gaining and exercising their power, and the ways in which they are using their power to gather information about citizens on a scale that was simply not possible previously. These are enormous changes occurring very quickly, and we are far from understanding the consequences they are

having, and will continue to have, for the nature of our social and political life. Traditional academic disciplines like sociology and politics have been slow to take account of the transformative impact of media and communication technologies in the modern world, but in the wake of the digital revolution, they can no longer afford to be indifferent, precisely because this revolution is about so much more than media and communications. Now, more than ever, we need an interdisciplinary approach that is well-equipped to grapple with the complexities of the digital revolution – and we need this not only to study media and communications, but to understand social and political life.

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