

**Mergers, Corporisation and Mass Market Publishing: to what extent can it be argued that the quality and diversity of literature is compromised by the commercialisation of the publishing business in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

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**Abstract**

In this article I will look at the merging of Penguin Books and Random House as an example of the movement towards the overall corporisation of the publishing industry; I will seek to understand the notion of a “mass culture” society and critically examine the views of those who consider that this is what we have become. I will question the extent to which it is true that the growing commercialisation of the business has resulted in a lack of diversity, and that it compromises the proliferation of quality literature.

**Key Words**

Mergers, Corporisation, Mass Culture, High Culture, Mass Market, Capitalism.

**Article**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has been a tumultuous period in the publishing industry, frequently likened to the revolutionary era of the invention of the printing press with regards to how dramatically, and rapidly, changes have taken place. The rise of the e-book, e-readers and online platforms for bookselling has completely reinvigorated the way books are created and distributed. Meanwhile, the accelerating trend for heavy discounting through new sales channels including the online marketplace, supermarkets, and chain stores, means that independent publishing and bookselling is increasingly struggling to survive. In this environment, many publishing groups have consolidated into much

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larger firms, with mass media corporations acquiring smaller, formerly independent publishers to be imprints as a part of their wider publishing programme.

The drive towards commercial success and growth by takeovers has resulted in a growing monopolisation of the marketplace by a few publishing powerhouses. There has now been increasing concern from more traditional publishers, academics, and cultural commentators, that the dominance of these firms and their “mass market” publishing is killing the diversity of the industry, and further, that literature created as a “mass culture” product often has little or no artistic value. The financial ability of these corporations to determine what is available to readers in bookshops also means that books published by smaller firms are less able to reach as many readers. There is a growing feeling in the industry that publishing has become polarised between the giant, mass market corporations, motivated by financial profit, and the smaller, independent firms who favour “high culture” and are satisfied with only marginal profits, directing their priorities to the release of worthwhile books.

I will now examine the merging of Penguin Books and Random House as an example of the movement in the industry. I will critically examine the views of those who consider that we have become a ‘mass culture’ society, and question the extent to which it is true that the growing commercialisation of the business has resulted in a lack of diversity, and that it compromises the proliferation of quality literature.

The merging of Penguin Books and Random House in July of last year marked yet another significant turning point in the growth of the publishing industry. The combined businesses are reported to be worth £ 2.6 billion, and Penguin Random House has become the largest book publishing house in the world (The Telegraph, 2013). Penguin Random House now has an overwhelming market share of the book publishing industry; 27% of the UK market and 25% of the US (The Telegraph, 2013). All of this comes at a critical time for publishing, which has been severely

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affected by the growth of online businesses, including Amazon and Google, who have changed the way the book business operates and have generated huge competition.

Some have viewed the move as a way for print publishers to combine their strength and steady their foothold in this turbulent period for the book industry, which has seen a strong lurch in market preference towards digital formats and online retailing. While there is anxiety over what the Penguin Random House merger means for diverse publishing, it has been said that the real threat comes from: “Amazon, with its formidable pricing power, that is the gorilla in the book industry jungle” (The Guardian, 2013). Amazon’s drive and ability to push the already falling prices of books further down, and the enormous discounts they demand from publishers, is, indeed, the reason why only the largest companies are able to feature on the front pages of their site and thus, inevitably, the bestseller charts. They have also been one of the main forces behind the steady establishment of the e-book, which, too, is generally lower in price than a traditional print book.

The de-valuing of the book as a cultural product as a result of this pressure will cause lasting damage for publishers, as customers will become unwilling to pay prices that allow publishing businesses to even reach a breakeven point. This reinforces the business model of selling in bulk and at low prices; resulting in the mass market publishers becoming the only viable contenders in the field, and smaller groups being pushed out. However, it might be considered that the new creature, Penguin Random House, represents the lesser of two evils; the publishers will at least be able to financially fortify the independent companies they have adopted as imprints, and gain a strong footing as established publishers in resistance to the up and coming digital competitors, who are forcing such tight margins from them.

The merging of forces entails more than just combined financial capital, but cultural, too. With a huge breadth of imprints between them, many of the best known and most popular authors, and a staff

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of 10,000 worldwide, the company have overtaken their rival Hachette and become a publishing powerhouse (The Guardian, 2013).

For those who are already critically concerned with the way in which the publishing industry has become increasingly dominated by mass media corporations, however, the merger has been seen as another alarming blow for independent publishing. There is fear that the narrowing of the market to just a handful of powerhouse publishing groups will result in the narrowing and homogenisation of reading culture: ‘the pressure is to produce fewer books, concentrating on those with the highest sales potential’ (Schiffrin, 2007, 6). Critics are concerned that truly interesting, intelligent, literary books will never be shared because their artistic value is overlooked in favour of “mass market” products.

Jason Epstein, an early Doubleday editor, sees “recent developments in media concentration as a betrayal of publishing’s ‘true nature’”, as “under duress from unfavourable market conditions and the misconceptions of remote managers”, the business has changed and begun to make the mistake of treating books like “any other” commodity (Jason Epstein, as quoted in Brouillette, 2007). Further, Shiffrin, former Managing Director of Pantheon books:

Belief in the market, faith in its ability to conquer everything, a willingness to surrender all other values to it—and even the belief that it represents a sort of consumer democracy- these things have become the hallmark of publishing. (Schiffrin, 2001, 6).

With regards to the media corporations, the ‘Big 5’ groups are Time Warner, Disney, CBS, Bertelsmann and News Corporation. Between them they control over 80% of the book market (Schiffrin, 2001). While there has been parallel increase in small independents and start up firms, these groups have been marginalised in the market in favour of a capitalist centrality. “In recent years, publishers have been put on a procrustean bed and made to fit one of two patterns: as purveyors of entertainment or of hard information.” (Schiffrin, 2001).

The notion that the growth of a “mass” society has produced a divide in culture between “mass” or “popular” culture, and “high” culture, is not a recent development for cultural commentators. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the improvement of printing technology and the growth of democratic education meant that reading was, for the first time, available for all in the population, the intelligentsia have expressed concerns with regards to the quality of literature that the new “mass culture” is able to produce. Where, hitherto, reading had been the sole pursuit of an elite group of intellectuals, and books were created to suit their high-end tastes, “business enterprise found a profitable market in the cultural demands of the newly awakened masses, and the advance in technology made possible the cheap production of books” (Dwight MacDonald, 1953).

For many critics, these developments marked the beginning of a schism in literary culture between intellectual, niche “high culture” texts, and the new mass produced products for the mass market consumer. Bordieu first formulated the theory that suggests that literary texts tend to aspire either to gain “cultural” or “symbolic” capital, or “economic” capital, i.e. are produced for financial benefit. We might consider that the former is the capital aspired to by literary texts, and literary, independent publishers, and the latter the pursuit of the commercial publishers. Furthermore, commentators including T.S. Eliot suggested that since the spread of education “there are too many books published. It is one of the evil effects of democracy.” (John Carey, 2002, 15). The suggestion that the quality of these new books were not as impressive as their quality is somewhat of a precursor to the events and debates that have unfolded since his time.

While it is clear that there are degrees of difference in the intellectual value and status of cultural products, much of the debate for academics has centred on whether this marks a degeneration of high culture by the low, or whether “mass culture” and the prevalence of “popular” taste is simply democratic. Dennis Brogan laments that:

. . . to many observers who are hostile to the political movement of democracy, the present state of popular culture justifies all their fears, and to believers in democracy, the state of popular culture deceives some of the most profound hopes of the democratic movement. (Dennis Brogan, 1954, 188).

Further, due to the competitiveness of the mass market, MacDonald believes that for all its aspirations, high culture cannot avoid association with the lower “whereas High Culture could formerly ignore the mob and seek to please only the cognoscenti, it must now compete with Mass Culture or be merged into it.” (MacDonald, 1953, 170) The time that has elapsed since this piece was published has only proven his fears; mergers and acquisitions have become the norm and the mass market has the upper hand.

MacDonald believed, however, that the stark contrast between High and Mass Culture outlined by Bordieu and others is dissolving. Rather than seeing the growing exacerbation of a binary polarity between high/low, independent/mass market literature, he believed that the barriers between cultures are merging and all content is becoming homogenised into something unrecognisable: “There is slowly emerging a tepid, flaccid Middlebrow culture that threatens to engulf everything in its spreading ooze” (MacDonald, 1953, 173).

Has mass culture gained such force because there is such a high demand for easy reads at low prices? Or is it the responsibility of the publishers, who churn out such material, and perhaps ought to dedicate more of their efforts to “help raise the standard of public taste” as Faber professed to be his aim? (Faber, 1934, 23)

Modern publishing is focused towards producing books because there is a market for them; there has been much commentary on the power shift from the Editorial to Marketing departments as a result of the commercialisation of the business. Nevertheless, first reads have to come from somewhere, and

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it might be argued that the middle ground has been established as a norm before readers approach it, and thus it is likely that they will grow to enjoy texts similar to those they have read before.

Yet the extent to which it is true that all mass publishing corporations only produce low level, generic books, because they produce for the mass market is something to take issue with. As publishers have become globalised, it means that the market for whom they are producing has become increasingly diverse, and in order to make profits, they needs must address all of these markets with a varied range of material. The mass market should not be viewed as a single entity, but a plethora of smaller social and cultural markets which make up the whole of the reading public.

Further, it is true that the corporate publishing firms do maintain guidelines which place financial constraints on what editors are allowed to commission, on the basis that books produced should be able to succeed when produced on a high first print run. Yet all these major companies maintain that editorial independence remains with the editors of each imprint, and each of these tend to address very different audiences and tastes. Thus, theoretically, so long as there is a viable market from which these companies can make a profit, the choice of what is produced is left with the imprints, according to what they were established in as an independent company.

Indeed, the broad range of the sort of books published by these conglomerates is astounding. Penguin Random House has “a back catalogue ranging from 19th-century master stylist Henry James to kinky novelist EL James”. Thus, with regards to Bordieu’s argument, their establishment in classical literary fields as well as in contemporary literature means that these companies possess cultural and symbolic capital as well as economic. While this is more problematic for the independents, whose claim lies in their greater legitimacy, it also contradicts the argument that these firms only produce formulaic, commercially motivated books. In terms of the imprints themselves, their publishing scope extends from Black Swan, which produces the likes of Sophie Kinsella and

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Kate Atkinson, to the literary imprint Hamish Hamilton, which publishes authors such as Kiran Desai and Zadie Smith: modern classics that will surely form the literary canon of the future.

“One way to combat fears about the corporisation in the publishing business is to point to the market triumph of ‘serious’ literary fiction as a distinct publishing category” (Brouillette, 2007). For example, the growing prevalence of literary prizes, though they are frequently accused of “commercialising” literary texts, has in many ways had a positive effect with regards to improving the standard of the population’s literary taste, as their prevalence in the best seller charts and the sales figures for those shortlisted reveal. Though there is heated debate with regards to what qualifies as a “highly literary” text, if these prizes push this more challenging literature into the hands of the “general reader” and inspire debate on the subject, then at least commercialisation has been of benefit to overall literary standards.

The literary prize debate, too, throws into question the issue of regarding all “mass” produced literature as low in value. Does a highly literary, artistic expression become a “mass culture” product once it has become popular and commercially successful? What about the fact that many writers whom we now regard as classics were no more than popular entertainment in the time in which they were established (including Shakespeare and Dickens)?

In terms of a polarisation between “mass culture” texts, such as rom-coms, thrillers, celebrity autobiographies, and “high culture” literary fiction, poetry etc., I for one would suggest that there is no reason why the two cannot co-exist. This needn’t entail a “dumbing down” of good literature. Rather than a stark contrast between two literary genres, or a homogenised middle, the key advantage of the growth of a globalisation of world society is the fact that there is now available a great diversity of information, entertainment, and stimulation across the great breadth of the cultural spectrum.

One of the important points is that people look for different things from different books, depending on who they are, or their mood at the time. Even Faber admitted that “I don’t spend all my spare time reading Plato, Shakespeare and Dante. I spend a good deal of it reading Mr. Edgar Wallace.” (Faber, 1934, 22) Many of us are able to enjoy both Tolstoy and E.L. James, depending upon what we are looking for in a text at any given time.

With regards the high/low culture debate, it seems to me that publishers, if they want their industry to grow and develop, ought to be encouraging all people to read everything they can. When your business is to sell books, especially in the modern media age, it seems to me to be fatal folly to discourage people from buying or reading any sort of book, so long as people are reading. After all, one book leads to the next, and an enjoyment of *Fifty Shades of Grey* may lead to a reader picking up the protagonist’s favourite, *Rebecca*.

Thus I do not see the rise of mass publishing corporations as a threat to the diversity of the sort of texts that will be published. Mergers such as the Penguin Random House coalition are not opposed to the proliferation of diverse, quality, literature: this will always exist so long as there is a market for them and the price is right. The problem remains that these corporations will only publish books that will either make a profit for their own business and shareholders, or else to gain total market domination over their rivals. They have significant cultural and symbolic capital, but only because the two equate to a domination in the economic field. Does diversity exist, but at a cost to democracy in its current form? Can it truly be said to exist when it all comes under the umbrella of a capitalist dynasty?

What I do consider a major concern is the fact that the growing capitalisation of the business is resting the agency from smaller publishers: in terms of being able to afford shelf space in the bookshops through which they would like to sell, or simply to remain competitive in such a fast paced environment.

The consequence of this concentration is not so much that there are no alternative or smaller successful companies, but that the conglomerates control the rules of the game, having access to those aspects of publishing and marketing that require significant capital. (Brouillette, 2007, 54)

There is no easy solution to this problem. The nature of the book industry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is no more than a reflection of the global society, economics, and politics of our time. I suggest that the problems in the modern publishing industry do not come from a lack of quality literature, homogenisation of reading material, or from the demands of “mass society”, but as ever, they come from the top. The upper classes have regained the monopoly on culture that was supposedly lost in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: only now these classes are a different animal altogether. These people are not publishers, but capitalists. Business directors who do not care about books so long as they make a profit; the “elite” few who direct the nature of the business, who squeeze profit margins from stressed editors, and who will crush or swallow up smaller companies for a greater return. The problem with the commercial direction of the contemporary publishing industry, therefore, is not to do with the literature that is produced or what format it is distributed on. The real problem for publishers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as with most problems in world, is the unequal distribution of wealth.

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