
Morality in Publishing: The Impact of Conglomeration and the Alt-Right

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Abstract

This article deals with concerns over a loss of morality in publishing due to increased pressure from conglomerates to achieve higher profit margins that are more in line with their other media businesses. It analyses this issue within the context of the publishing industry's reaction to the commissioning of two alt-right public figures, Milo Yiannopoulos and Katie Hopkins, who have both achieved fame through the perpetration of hate speech. This article examines the moral and commercial issues surrounding their publication and reflects upon the question: is the publication of provocative, offensive rhetoric a defence of free speech, or does it simply provide a platform for hate speech? If the latter, do publishers have a moral duty to resist?

Key Words

Morality, conglomeration, resist, Trump, Katie Hopkins, Milo Yiannopoulos, *Rude*, *Dangerous*, controversy, alt-right

Introduction

Two conflicting issues that have impacted the UK and US publishing industries in recent times have been the acquisition of many publishers by media conglomerates and the tumultuous political environment, post-BREXIT and post-Trump. The former has resulted in the necessity of higher profit margins than ever before, some argue at the expense of culture, and the latter has induced a moral crisis within an industry which prides itself on

striving for equality, diversity, and reliability. Penguin Random House's website (2017) claims to be:

[C]ommitted to expanding our role as a cultural institution [...] new ideas, creativity and diverse voices [...] promote literacy and reading culture, support freedom of expression and reflect our belief in the power of books to connect and change lives.

Hachette's website (2017) also states that the press aims to "be a respected publisher that values diversity, nurtures talent, rewards success, and honor[s] its responsibility"; and MacMillan's (2017) Code of Conduct states: "Above all, we know that we must act with integrity and honesty [...] We aim to have a positive impact wherever we do business, and we should never lose sight of our responsibility to effect positive change in society as a whole". In a period of "alternative facts", political hype, and the election of a US president who actively speaks against diversity and equality, it could be argued that the book industry is vital in combatting these values: Onwuemezi (2017b) notes that "there are readers reaching for books to try and understand this new world, and it makes our job of supporting writers and reaching readers all the more important." However, the extent to which publishers are loyal to this duty versus those whose priority is commerce, varies greatly as it has done throughout history. Two case studies which are key to this issue are Milo Yiannopoulos's *Dangerous* and Katie Hopkins's *Rude*. Are the publishers who approached these controversial figures compromising their moral values, or are they defending the right to free speech? Do they aid in gaining an understanding of the "alt-right" (a group of people with far-right, "alternative" ideologies), or are they purely commercially motivated? If the latter, is this a wise decision? To use Grady's (2017) phrase, "does hate sell?"

The Impact of the Media and Conglomeration on the Publishing Industry

With the availability of free information via digitised news apps, social media, and the internet, it could be argued that the publisher's traditional role as gatekeeper is obsolete. On the other hand, Coser's point from 1975 is still a valid one. Despite electronic media:

it seems obvious [...] that the men and women who control access to the medium that Gutenberg invented are still in a position to channel the flow of ideas and control a central, though by no means only, medium for ideas. (3)

Although publishing is one of many industries that provide entertainment and/or information, and although there is more competition than ever, it still occupies a unique place in the media: one which wrestles with the issue of conscience versus commerce. Consequently, because publishing is not a business that is solely profit-driven or an artistic or intellectual service, but something in between, the question of where each publishing company places itself on this scale reflects the level of duty to culture it believes it should uphold.

In 1934, Faber asserted that although “we are in, or connected with the book trade, because we love books”, in order to survive “we are under the regrettable necessity of making money out of them” (19); a traditionally romantic view of the book trade. In 1975, Coser noted that because publishing is not centrally bureaucratized, “they are pushed and pulled by contradictory expectations, with some of their role partners stressing profitability while others insist on the facilitation of cultural contributions, they find it hard to gain a stable resting point” (18), reflecting the increasing commercial and cultural tensions. Another issue facing the profitability of publishers is that the “industry is faced with a high degree of market insecurity and unpredictability” (Coser 1975, 21), so even if a publisher decides to prioritise commerce, this is no simple matter. Coser goes on to describe many publishers’ techniques as following a “shotgun principle, scattering many shots in the hope that at least a few hit the target” (21). Although commercially this approach is less-than-desirable, from a cultural perspective it could be considered a virtue. Because of the necessary risk-taking, publishers can afford to be more political or innovative in some new titles in the hope that they “hit the target”, and if they do not, the books become just another casualty of the technique. However, some critics believe that the target is more likely to be hit not through high-quality, innovative and intelligent publications, but instead by “offer[ing] the public just what it wants, to pander to the worst prejudices of the moment [...] but it is a dull road to follow.” (Unwin 1960, 341)

This approach may be “dull”, but it is nonetheless popular. Faber points out that publishers are not martyrs: “they must make profits; if they don’t they must cease to exist. They must therefore take account of what the public wants” (1934, 23). Asahina posits that what the

public wants aligns itself with the entertainment industry: in capitalising on hype, “publishers are following a trend, rather than initiating one [...]. I don’t think you can separate this from the general trend in the media; if anything, publishing lagged behind television, and especially radio” (Span 2005). Schiffrin attributes this to the impact of conglomeration on the publishing industry. He states that:

The average profit of publishing houses throughout Western Europe and the United States, during much of the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, was in the range of 3 to 4 percent per annum, roughly the amount of interest paid by a savings bank. Until the firms began to be bought up by large media conglomerates, only a few decades ago, that percentage was considered perfectly adequate. It was only when the new owners began to compare the profits of their publishing houses with those of their radio networks, television stations, newspapers, and magazines that they began to worry. (2010, 2)

This led to the fact that “within the houses, editors are now judged by the amount of money their books made” (3), and has arguably resulted in a neglect to publish high-quality, intellectual, and moral books, in favour of making money. On the other hand, the reaction to the Trump election has, ironically, ignited hope with regards to a moral duty in publishing, not just a commercial one.

So far, much of this debate has been centred around the publisher, but it is important to remember other vital businesses within the industry – booksellers and libraries. The recent election of a president who “has no time to read” (Fisher 2016) has, unsurprisingly, sparked concern across the industry, and exemplified not only commercial opportunities, but a considerable amount of cultural, intellectual and moral outcry.

The Reaction of the Publishing Industry to the Current Political Environment

In response to Trump’s election in the US and the BREXIT vote in the UK, book conferences and fairs in 2016 and 2017 have been highly political. At the Publishing Scotland conference in February 2017, Marion Sinclair stated that hope is the “engine” of the book business and the traditional values that underline the sector- including tolerance and fact checking- are “needed now more than ever” (Onwuemezi 2017b). Libraries and booksellers in the US have

further reinforced this position in the aftermath of the Trump election: shop windows have been filled with topical titles such as Orwell's *1984* and Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*, labelled "#ResistTable" (Bosman 2017), and similarly libraries have adopted "#LibrariesResist", with How stating that "there are things that librarians and libraries absolutely cannot remain neutral on, including defending intellectual privacy and intellectual freedom" (Rebolini 2017). In the same article Rebolini writes:

When hateful rhetoric encourages hate crimes, the preservation of safe spaces and cultural exchange is even more vital. When 'alternative' facts are legitimized, information literacy must be emphasized [...]. And when a travel ban promises to keep out immigrants and refugees, those who serve immigrant and refugee communities are impelled to fight it. (2017)

Not only do many libraries and booksellers evidently consider it a duty to defend these values, it is in their own commercial interests to defend literacy and responsible fact-checking, two integral aspects of the publishing industry. However, Clee (1999) suggests that publishers may be held to a higher standard than other media industries. In reference to the outrage concerning OUP's decision to drop its contemporary poetry list on commercial grounds, he points out: "publishers, we feel, are more than commercial organizations". However, with the impact of conglomeration and the pressure to compete commercially with more profit-driven media industries, are some critics holding publishers up to an unrealistic standard of morality?

In line with these concerns, Regan points out: "what people respond to in this culture is loud and brash and pointed and sometimes vulgar- that's what gets people's attention, on TV and radio and in books" (Span 2005). In the same article, Span states that although political books have always been a staple of publishing, the "revved-up tone is a more contemporary contribution". Two recent and controversial book deals that make an interesting study regarding both this claim and issues of morality, are Milo Yiannopoulos's *Dangerous* and Katie Hopkins's *Rude*, which could both potentially perpetrate and give a platform to hate speech.

Case Studies: Milo Yiannopoulos's *Dangerous* and Katie Hopkins's *Rude*

Milo Yiannopoulos, former editor of *Breitbart News*, has been described as “one of the internet’s biggest bullies” (Anderson 2017a), who was recently banned from Twitter for an attack on actor Leslie Jones’s race and gender. On his ongoing college-speaking-tour he has “doxed trans students” (Grady 2017), putting their lives in danger, and “routinely makes hyperbolically offensive statements like ‘feminism is cancer’” (Grady 2017), to be provocative. Until February 2017, Simon & Schuster’s imprint, Threshold, had offered him a \$250,000 deal for his book *Dangerous*; however, after a video emerged in which Yiannopoulos appeared to be defending paedophilia, the publisher finally pulled out of this controversial book deal. The situation caused a huge amount of dispute: The *Chicago Review of Books* announced it would not review *any* Simon & Schuster titles in 2017 (Morgan 2017), Roxane Gay pulled her upcoming book from Simon & Schuster’s list (Grabiec 2017), independent bookstores refused to display the book (Anderson 2017a) and heated debates around free speech and hate speech emerged once again in the publishing community.

A similar case arose in March 2017 when Biteback Publishing commissioned equally-controversial tabloid columnist and reality TV star Katie Hopkins’s memoir *Rude*. Hopkins’s columns frequently contain hate speech towards Muslims, women, migrants, and mental health sufferers, to name a few (Goldhill 2015). Iain Dale, MD of Biteback Publishing, conflates these issues into an arguably trivial metaphor, “I realise she is a marmite character for some” (Onwuemezi 2017a), and goes on to say that he is “really pleased to be publishing Katie”. The official blurb for the book states the following: “Katie doesn’t sugar-coat anything, and neither does she hold back, making her as honest in her book as she is in life” (Onwuemezi 2017a); an ominous description for some.

These new titles sparked fresh debate around censorship, free speech, obscenity and hate speech- none of which are new to the publishing industry: *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* by D.H. Lawrence was condemned by some on the grounds of obscenity, but ultimately freed on the grounds of artistic value (Robertson 2010); Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* was deemed “too dangerous for the general public” until it was re-published in Germany on the grounds of

“preventing these traumatic events from ever happening again” (Our Foreign Staff 2015); and *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, which deals with paedophilic themes, was ultimately considered “deeply moral” (Clee 1999, 13). Begley (2015) points out that if you “check out any list of the most frequently banned books [...] you’re likely to mistake it for a list of the most respected novels in literary history”. However, can *Rude* and *Dangerous*, commissioned for their writers’ notorious and controversial status rather than literary merit, be compared with this canon of banned books?

Carolyn Reidy, CEO of Simon & Schuster, and Iain Dale, MD of Biteback Publishing, have used similar defences in Yiannopoulos’s and Hopkins’s cases: “Both books reignited a familiar debate over the balance between defending free speech and giving a platform to hate speech, and both have been defended on the grounds of freedom of speech and straightforward commercialism” (McCrudden 2017). In defence of *Dangerous*, Reidy stated:

In these times, it is especially important to remember that as publishers we will always endeavour to give voice to a wide range of opinions and divergent viewpoints. We publish for many different, and frequently conflicting audiences, and must be fully cognizant of our responsibility to resist censorship and stand unequivocally for freedom of speech [...] no matter how difficult that might be at times.’ (Eyre and Campbell 2017)

In an article entitled “In Defence of Milo Yiannopoulos” (2017), Flannery summarises this issue by claiming, “the right to speak freely, even if your opinions are unpopular, should be the bedrock of our industry.” However, opponents of Yiannopoulos in the US and, to a lesser extent Hopkins in the UK (the case has received considerably less press coverage), do not consider the issue to be a defence of free speech; rather, the provision of a platform for hate speech.

An anonymous member of a debate group on the topic makes the point that publishers no longer have the power to censor because of the impact of other media forms: “I really don’t see a ‘censorship’ issue here. Book publishers are not effective gatekeepers anymore, like they were 20 years ago... They stand at the gate but the fence around the field is down and we’re all grazing wherever the hell we want” (Anderson 2017a). So perhaps the industry’s role is no longer one of gatekeeping information, but quality. In this instance, quality does

not just include literary proficiency, but quality of ideas and the upholding of values many publishers claim are so important to their businesses. Anderson (2017b) states, “as a global community of citizens, we are all fundamentally stronger through diversity and a free exchange of ideas”; Morgan (2017) writes, “to protect the victims of discrimination from its traumatic and sometimes deadly consequences, the literary community must stand against anyone – author or publisher – who peddles hate speech for profit”; and Peskin (2017) compares Yiannopoulos to a terrorist, “shouting ‘fire’ in a crowded theatre. The fire is otherness- that which is not white, Christian, and male; the crowded theatre is America”. Both *Dangerous* and *Rude* seemingly oppose the values of diversity, tolerance and reliability cited here and in many publishers’ manifestos and could be evidence of a lack of loyalty towards what publishing companies preach; however, Simon & Schuster’s imprint, Threshold, and Biteback Publishing are politically motivated: crucially, Threshold in particular, identifies itself as a right-wing imprint. In this case, it could be argued that Threshold are not “selling out”, but are, in fact, remaining loyal to the personality of the imprint and reflecting the views of many of their readers.

The fact that Dale’s assertion “Katie doesn’t sugar-coat anything, and neither does she hold back” (Onwuemezi 2017a) is meant as a marketing tool suggests that the main readership of her memoirs are likely to already be fans of her controversial views. Similarly, Yiannopoulos, a self-described “supervillain”, proudly asserts, “social justice warriors should be scared-very scared” (Eyre and Campbell 2017). Perhaps Anderson’s (2017a) phrase “funny thing about freedom of expression: it’s a lot easier to rally for it when someone is saying what you want to hear” is important to remember here. Anecdotal evidence (the Trump protests, a push for diversity and academic and intellectual value, to name a few) suggests that many in the publishing industry are politically more left-wing, and so there is a danger that conservative voices could go unheard. However, conservative values and hate speech are far from being the same thing. As Morgan (2017) points out: “Yiannopoulos is not a conservative intellectual leader with a political agenda. He’s a clickbait grifter who has made a name for himself spewing hate speech”.

Perhaps a more convincing case for the publication of books by infamously controversial figures is made by Anderson (2017a): “the suppression of noxious ideas does not defeat them; only vigorous disagreement can counter toxic speech effectively. Shutting down the conversation may temporarily silence disfavoured views, but does nothing to prevent them from spreading and resurfacing in other ways”. It could be argued that remaining ignorant of *why* such “hateful” views are so prominent, especially in the wake of the Trump election, exasperates the political situation by creating two polar extremes and little intellectual debate between the two. If publishers alienate themselves from the alt-right, they are at risk of further enforcing the “echo chambers” which polarise views and prevent a two-way exchange of opinions. Threshold points out exactly this: “an articulate discussion of these issues, coming from an unconventional source like Mr Yiannopoulos, could become an incisive commentary on today’s social discourse that would sit well within its scope and mission” (Kean 2017). The key issue here, though, is will *Dangerous or Rude* attract an audience hoping to gain a better understanding of the alt-right, or will they simply justify and legitimise hate speech for those who condone or agree with it? Anderson (2017a) points out that not only are readers “of course free to criticize any book for any reason”, they are likewise “free to choose not to read any book that they think contains objectionable material, or to urge a boycott”. This raises another key issue which often surrounds publication controversy – commerce.

Grady (2017) theorises that Yiannopoulos’s claims that his manuscript was not ready in February (despite plans for the book to be released in March) indicates that Threshold were rushing the book’s publication, “trying to capitalise on [his] 15 minutes of fame”, reinforcing Schiffrin’s (2010) argument that publishing is becoming “part of the entertainment industry” (7). Morgan (2017) reports that “during Yiannopoulos’s tenure at Breitbart – where he’s told gay people to ‘get back in the closet’ and women to ‘log off’ the internet – he has amassed more than 1 million followers on Facebook”, further strengthening the idea that the publishing of *Dangerous* was not so much an advocacy for free speech as the publishing equivalent of “clickability”. The eventual pulling of *Dangerous*, according to Roxane Gay (2017), is further evidence of this point: “when his comments about paedophilia/pederasty

came to light, Simon & Schuster realized it would cost them more money to do business with Milo than he could earn for them” (Grady 2017). She goes on to state, “it appears Threshold was perfectly willing, and even eager, to capitalize on the career Yiannopoulos built through hatred and bigotry, right up until the bigotry started to look like it wouldn’t be profitable” (2017).

Conversely, McCrudden (2017) suggests that in fact *Dangerous* and *Rude* may *not* equate to good business. After analysing the reading habits of demographics in support of and against Yiannopoulos and Hopkins, she asserts that in the UK “a third of UK consumers bought a book in the past month, compared with just a quarter of people who actively disagree with the idea we should all strive for equality” and that in the US, of the 7.1 million people who align with Yiannopoulos’s anti-equality worldview, “just 11% had bought a book in the last month”. She concludes, “hot air and controversy certainly fuels social media and fills column inches, but there’s scant evidence it makes people part with cold, hard cash”.

Conclusion

Dangerous and *Rude* may be a sad reflection of the impact of profit-driven conglomeration and the effect that the media’s penchant for hype has had on the publishing industry, but it is rash to suppose the industry is defined by this. The reaction of many publishers, booksellers and libraries to politics opposing diversity, immigration, equality and art has been fierce. The protests, boycotts and determination to represent minority voices within publishing indicate that, despite concerns over conglomeration, publishers do retain much of their personality. It is perhaps unrealistic to hold an entire industry up to high moral and artistic standards, but it is fair to say publishers are still trying to find a balance between conscience and commerce, as they always have done- long before Twitter.

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