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## **The Role of the Editor**

### ***(The Future Editor: Creative Producers for a Digital Age)***

*This paper will consider the role of the book commissioning ( or acquisitions ) editor in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, drawing on my experience as an academic and trade nonfiction publisher and university researcher in digital creativity – and on interviews with publishers.*

After outlining the current situation as I see it ...

I will talk about 3 aspects of the role of the editor:

1. What they do well
2. What they could do
3. What might be stopping them

## **HOW I GOT HERE**

I have been researching and speaking about the future role of the editor over the last five years and talks about this subject seen much interest from editors – who either feel frustrated at the lack of change in their roles or are absolutely unaware of the digital landscape, working in roles I recognise from 1990.

In my university role I have carried out a number of small research projects. I started with practice-based research - experiments in digital and multimedia making. I then moved on to new ways of working collaboratively in multiskilled teams – learning from the tech sector.

And I am currently carrying out interviews to scope out the current and potential future role of editors in the UK and US for the new AHRC 'Future of the Academic Book' research project. I want to know how editors see themselves in 2015 and how their role might look in 5, 10 years time. I am also exploring the editor's role from the author's perspective – charting the experiences of two academics as I take them through a close collaborative editorial development process.

## **But back to Publishing ----**

We live in a digital age; an age of disruption and disintermediation.

The Publishing industry, once harangued with tales of the imminent death of the book, has come a very long way since Google started organising the world's information in a way Publishers used to. It's shifted its business to accommodate a quick-fix ebook format in the 7 years since Amazon launched the Kindle ebook reader (2007) and in the five years since Apple launched the iPad (2010).

In the intervening years we've seen a variety of digital publications trialled on an audience that has increasingly sophisticated expectations of its digital media and an appetite for content to populate its devices.

--- But, I'm not convinced publishers are feeding this appetite yet.

### *The Challenges*

We are **not moving fast enough** or imaginatively enough – innovation is relatively limited in comparison to other sectors - we're still at Publishing 2.0. I hear from interviewees that digital is often misunderstood and staff are still not really given opportunities to develop creative skills in digital making.

We have **not worked together as an industry** to develop a content making software (or platform) which is nimble, unobtrusive, enables the maker to concentrate on being creative and audience aware, and turns out truly interactive publications and integrated media. There

As Michael Bhaskar has noted, we are misunderstood. **We have not communicated our value** and in this space have crept self publishing 'gurus' and publishing platforms such as Kindle; and Open Access evangelisers in the academic sector. Both risk a freefall of content of variable quality and in the process destabilise an industry that at its heart excellent at what it does.

### *The positives*

Publishing is lucky though – **it has a highly educated, creative, passionate workforce** with excellent communication, design and making skills. Add in digital tech skills, enterprise and entrepreneurship and you've got the makings of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century workforce that is ready to tackle the challenge of how to make digital + publishing work for publishers, authors and readers.

We have an **audience who carry content devices with them at all times** – 58% UK population own a smartphone. This is an opportunity for Publishers – I'd argue for editors to conceive imaginative, mobile-suited content.

**And – let's remind ourselves of the VALUE of Publishing it boils down to:**

- The transformation of a MS that an editor can bring
- its ability to amplify content and authors
- its skill at conceptualising and creating engaging books
- its experience at selling titles into multiple markets

*and ultimately,*

- its careful selection and curating of culture, stories and ideas in an age where we experience a bewildering deluge of content

## The Editor in the industry

The publishing industry is in flux – caught between the traditional practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the ever-shifting landscape of digital publishing.

Which century your working life best resembles, largely depends upon the area of the industry you work in and the role you have. Those working in production on scientific journals are firmly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; while book commissioning editor roles look much as they did 30 years ago – only without the long lunches and extravagant launch parties.

This **paper will explore an oversight** – a fundamental mistake that I feel publishing as an industry has made, but one that is a result of editors losing their status in the last 20 years.

We can see how digital has impacted on distribution and speed of delivery, production, sales data, marketing and publicity.

### **BUT - Where are commissioning editors in this story of ongoing transformation?**

We appear to have experienced a **digital revolution** which has barely registered in the activities of most Commissioning editors.

Seth Godin understands the role of the future editor perhaps better than the industry when he spoke about the transformation of marketing into content marketing saying:

‘You need editors ... who will push the envelope to make the thing go forward.’

Former **Bloomsbury and OUP editor, Peter Ginna** says that ‘All great publishing houses, and I would argue most really successful ones, are driven by editorial taste, passion, and savvy.’

Why are they not leading digital innovation in their companies?

**Editors in 2015 might mark up draft manuscripts using the ‘track changes’** facility in Microsoft Word; they might discover a few new writers by trawling through popular blog sites. They might in an individual capacity, share experiences as social media users and occasionally piggyback leading ‘influencers’ to promote their authors. But this is being a user – not a maker. Digital is not integrated into the Commissioning Editor’s role in 2015. This represents an enormous missed opportunity as editors have long been the creative powerhouses of Publishing companies and tastemakers in our culture.

**Perhaps we've forgotten what Commissioning editors do** – their very specific unique skills?

**They are:**

**Gatekeepers** – they use their reading and publishing experience (and intellect) to exert quality control (for the benefit of readers faced with a deluge of content and their publishing company – whose brand values they are protecting).

**Ideas people/** content makers and shapers.

*---- This is the place where innovation should be happening*

**Taste-makers, content-curators**, - they have a good feel for the cultural context and the zeitgeist (and are working a few years ahead on trends which most of us do not know about yet)

**Talent spotters – they work with the talent – the authors – and are perfectly placed to select the best team to produce the best product.**

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Their **editorial 'nose', collaborative working skills**, and varied skillset make them the perfect people to reimagine publishing.

-- At OUP I worked very closely with my authors – developing book ideas out of their interests and research; working on the structure and writing style, thinking about how to reach readers. This is relatively unusual now – but is I would argue a potentially good approach for incorporating digital into book publishing at the earliest stage in the process.

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The **creative opportunities of digital are enormous** and so far, we haven't even really scratched the surface as we keep reinventing the print book – rather than starting with the material; thinking about the user experience; how to enable meaningful audience participation. But authors need help with navigating all the possibilities – and this should be where their editor comes in...

**Universe-building and storyworld making / participatory** and live publishing give us the opportunity to create many different types of books and book products to reach a wide audience and to satisfy fans. We have a lot to learn from other industries.

## HOW?

Editors are not yet 'pushing the envelope' in book publishing companies. **Godin** recommends giving them the information – the stats – and resources to do just that but outside the existing infrastructure.

Other industries – where working collaboratively throughout the process is crucial – such as the film industry have specific roles for Creative Producers – the people who gather the teams and make successful cultural products happen. This would represent a new way of working for the industry – perhaps one that is necessary in facing the challenges ahead?

**We need Editors to get their mitts on digital stuff and play** if Publishing as an industry is to reimagine itself and remain important in cultural and economic terms. They need TIME and SPACE to start to think differently. Nonfiction writing lends itself to this digi interpretation and projects such as NYT's *Snow Fall* project is a good eg of early-stage longform digital publishing. It is nice but minimal in terms of using digital tech and content – here, these are only really 'illustrations' they do not have functionality. This is where Editors would push for more meaning – more structure.

I met a young editor at a major trade publisher who was busy teaching herself coding and Ruby in her spare time. Her Company had her tucked away in ebook production – she busied herself tweaking ebook formats to make them better. Why has no one taken her – and a few others like her, put them in a team with a designer and marketer and set them on some key lists?

**So to recap: the**

### **5 components of the Editor of the Future**

1. Curate (taste) informed by deep subject /category knowledge and exp; trusted sources with integrity
2. Shape and make - stories, ideas and research into high-quality meaningful, authoritative and accessibly-written multi-format publications – use digital to develop and differentiate content
5. talent spotting - identifying, coaching and advocating talent
4. lead collab teams – working in a creative collaborative team with authors, designers, marketers, data analysts, programmers,
5. manifestly express the transformative value of professional publishers and the process

## **WHAT? can these editors do?**

-- **The 21<sup>st</sup>-century editor, in an accentuated role as** innovative creative producer (combining creativity with team-building and entrepreneurial skills), can now wield a wider range of tools, inspired by the approaches used in the creative-tech sector for new product development such as user experience, data analysis, iterative testing as well as a range of digital creative content tools.

**Editors can work with an author** (building a team around them) to develop their ideas in multiple formats, across multiple platforms – each iteration making best use of the particular features of the digital format (game to social media)

**Working with marketing experts**, you can reach local, specialist, national and international audiences at the click of a button. They can talk to each other, build a community around the author, the book's subject.

A new approach and some creative freedom would also attract a wider range of **multiskilled employees** (we all know that Publishing has a problem over lack of diversity in its workforce- kiss of death in the 21stC). At present publishing doesn't look like a good option if you want to get on and make great stuff – you'd go to games.

### **My experience: editor to university**

As an editor now in a university job with an expectation of carrying out cutting-edge work, I have been lucky enough have the freedom to experiment with digital tech and writing that I would not have done in-house.

My 1<sup>st</sup> experiment in 2010 was a digital first, mobile-ready, multimedia interactive book about **JA** –. Following the silicon valley mantra of fail fast - fail quickly, I ditched this as being too difficult to pull off without a multi-skilled team working collaboratively in ways I was not used to. Another problem emerged – I needed a digital publishing production system to put my content into and to produce various digital outputs – this did not exist – and still doesn't.

I also developed a project called **The Social Media Experiment** to explore the ways in which those with publishing skills could work across multiple platforms creating imaginative and tailored multimedia content. Noting the growing importance of live events (for music revenues and increasing for books) Live events and the people at them became my content. I put together a team consisting of a film producer and Publishing students.

I constantly asked myself if this was 'Publishing' and after 12 successful events and with many different forms of content produced, I think the answer is **YES – but it's a new kind of publishing.**

I have moved in the space of 5 years from book editor to social media maker and video director. If I can do it then so can those in the industry.



## **Companies and infrastructure**

**New ways of working** are needed to make innovative reader-friendly book products. This is where we can learn from other sectors: such as tech start-ups and design agencies where fast R&D and collaborative working come as standard.

HC CEO, **Charlie Redmayne** talking about editors in 2011 was adamant that they need to become people with the content vision and he felt that there were just not enough editors in the industry with those skills. But doesn't the industry have a responsibility to help develop editors to create the conditions for innovation?

While people have been shown to be adaptable, business infrastructures and processes are less so.

Publishing co.s silo their staff and processes in print-age infrastructures which prevent collaboration (smaller companies by their very nature enable working across roles, but are still stuck with old processes) –This all seems very restrictive after my experiences working in new ways.

We need to build organisations that can adapt quickly to change - because the future is unpredictable – creating new ways of working in collaborative teams where skills and knowledge are shared is crucial to our success.

I propose that Editors are placed at the centre of fast-paced, small-group creative, marketing and tech teams working on individual titles or lists. That they are given some freedom to experiment and play, to learn how to make collaboratively with those other than just the author. This is how we will develop Publishing 3.0.

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## **And what of Universities and Publishing courses and an enhanced role for editorial?**

Tech will change and so there is little point in spending time teaching this – apart from the fundamentals. What is more important is the speed of assimilation on information, picking up new tech quickly, knowing who to ask, being able to work with a wide range of people – all with different specialist skills.

Universities have an important role to play in digital innovation –working with publishers on research projects and aiding the dissemination of knowledge.

I developed the BSU course as a creative studio-based course to tackle digital head on. We work with tech and creative companies as well as mainstream publishers on innovation projects. Our students understand design thinking, have core publishing skills, can make digital prototypes and products – importantly they can work collaboratively in small and large teams; with long and short lead times. They are adaptable, happy to learn new things: editors of the future.

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