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Building Brand and Community: Tracing the Impact of Non-Book Literary Programming on Book
Publishers' Economic and Cultural Capital

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:
Master of Science in Writing and Book Publishing

Portland State University

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RESEARCH QUESTION

Do publishers who offer branded literary programming (e.g., writing workshops, contests, or through other affiliated publications) in addition to publishing books benefit from increased sales or cultural capital compared to publishers who do not?

ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the role and function of literary programming offered by some book publishers as a supplement to their publishing business model, and seeks to illuminate the ways that these programs may contribute to the economic and the cultural capital accrued by these publishers and their brands. Using a selection of book publishers that include writing workshops, writing contests, and other literary publications within their brand and in their business models and comparing them a selection of similar publishers who do not offer these types of programs, this research examines and compares: each publisher's social media reach on Facebook and Twitter; sales data for one case study title per publisher; and the frequency of publicity generated by each press independent of their books.

BACKGROUND

When Penguin and Random House merged in 2013, the combined force of these two Big Six publishers was projected to control around 25% of the book market in the United States¹. With so many books published by such a small contingent of very large publishers, it is somewhat bemusing that readers are often not familiar with the names and brands of even the largest publishers, whose names and logos are emblazoned upon every book and referred to in nearly

¹ Julie Bosman, "Penguin and Random House Merge, Say Change Will Come Slowly," *The New York Times*, July 1, 2013, accessed May 6, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/02/business/media/merger-of-penguin-and-random-house-is-completed.html>

all book reviews and publicity. For small and medium independent book publishers, the challenge to be recognized as a brand and to stand out in a field filled with competing publishers of similar missions, resources, and business models can be even more of a struggle. The question of what impact these particular types of programs might have on a book publisher both economically and in terms of cultural capital is rooted in a larger and more nebulous question of what publishers can do to stand out in an industry that is largely invisible to the consumer base that it serves.

Many book publishers maintain a healthy business focusing solely on the project of publishing books and following a fairly traditional books-only business model. Others have worked to build more innovative businesses that go above and beyond their books and seek to engage with wider audiences, and with audiences that may be attracted by literary content other than books. Some of these business models have been developed fully in tandem with publishers' mission statements as a way to help them fulfill particular needs and goals within their literary communities, whether or not they are lucrative; and some of them serve as a sustaining financial component of a business model that might not survive without the additional income brought in by something other than book sales alone. Whatever their goals may be, the inclusion of supplemental literary programming can help book publishers of all sizes to strengthen their brands and their name recognition; bolster their access to wider audiences; and reap increased economic capital and cultural capital.

Though different publishers offer many different types of supplemental merchandise and programming, this study focuses on just three commonly utilized non-book programs: 1) workshops; 2) writing contests; and 3) additional publications such as journals and literary magazines. These three types of additional "literary programs" are similar in that they appeal to

audiences of authors and writers rather than audiences that are purely reader-based (though many publishers facilitate branded literary programs targeted for readers as well).

Writer audiences are significant for several reasons, but perhaps the most important reason of all is the traditional positioning of the writer between reader-consumers and book publishers. This relationship has long been a predicament to publishers hoping to establish themselves as tastemakers and carriers of particular literary style and value, not to mention of the particular qualities associated with their brand: “Traditionally, [publishers] have little to no brand recognition with book buyers because it’s been the author’s ‘brand’, not the publisher’s, that’s typically been marketed to consumers.”² Developing this relationship between publishers and readers is one that seems incredibly important, particularly as bookstores and traditional booksellers struggle and large retailers like Amazon continue to dominate book sales³. To top it off, as Mike Shatzkin points out, the pattern of closing traditional retail channels with the boom of non-traditional publishing channels makes for a particularly weird moment in the publisher-reader relationship: “With so many more books to choose from and *really* available than there ever were before, the function of gatekeepers, which trade publishers and booksellers clearly and proudly were, becomes an anachronism.”⁴ As the traditional channels close and the industry encounters new phenomena, it becomes even more critical that book publishers find ways to stay on top these shifts, adapt quickly, and welcome new traditions as best they can. Many industry professionals and insiders have looked to a direct-to-consumer model as a likely evolutionary route for the book publishing world, one that is at once totally new

² William Kingsland and Rakesh Satyal, “Why Book Publishers Need to Think Like Amazon,” *Publishing Perspectives*, March 17, 2014, Accessed April 25, 2016.

<http://publishingperspectives.com/2014/03/why-book-publishers-need-to-think-like-amazon/#.VzH5rWQrLq0>

³ Ellen Harvey, “How Book Publishers Pivoted Toward Direct-to-Consumer Sales in 2015,” *Book Business*, December 29, 2015, Accessed May 5, 2016,

<http://www.bookbusinessmag.com/article/how-book-publishers-pivoted-toward-direct-to-consumer-sales-in-2015/>

⁴ Mike Shatzkin, “Atomization: publishing as a function rather than an industry,” *The Shatzkin Files* (blog), The Idea Logical Company, March 19, 2013, Accessed April 25, 2016,

<http://www.idealogy.com/blog/atomization-publishing-as-a-function-rather-than-an-industry/>

to publishers and yet isn't an entirely new concept in other industries. As Murray Izenwasser writes in his publishing expert post for *Digital Book World*, "going direct-to-consumer isn't just about the revenue you'll gain from establishing a direct sales channel. Equally important—maybe even more so—is developing that customer relationship that in many cases doesn't yet exist in the publishing world."⁵

As the publishing industry evolves with changing technology and ever-expanding social and digital cultures, the pressure to build recognizable publisher brands and engage directly with communities of readers, writers, fans, and consumers, many publishers have grappled with this particular barrier. If authors are the key to branding and name recognition (or, at the very least, one of the keys), then there might just be something for publishers to gain in the adoption of additional programming meant to harness the power of the writing community as a way to build brands and foster literary communities around them. Joseph Esposito offers a useful framework to understand this for author brand-publisher brand relationship. He proposes that because the strength of a publisher's brand and name is valuable to *authors*, and because the name of the author is what appeals to *readers*, that publisher branding does indirectly impact readers and is therefore well-worth investing in and cultivating very carefully: "Brands matter because authors think they do. The best brands attract the best authors - a virtuous circle, in which good authors strengthen brands and brands confer their aura on authors."⁶ Esposito traces the indirect impact of publisher branding through authors to their readers, and notes that the true impact of a successful, strong, recognizable publisher brand can be detected in this author-reader relationship. William Kingsland and Rakesh Satyal also advocate for leveraging authors as an asset to build publisher brands in the eyes of readers:

⁵ Murray Izenwasser, "Why All Publishers Can and Should Go Direct-to-Consumer," *Digital Book World Expert Publishing Blog* (blog), February 2, 2015, Accessed May 2, 2016, <http://www.digitalbookworld.com/2015/why-all-publishers-can-and-should-go-direct-to-consumer/>

⁶ Joseph Esposito, "Why Publishers' Brands Matter," *The Scholarly Kitchen*, April 12, 2010, Accessed April 26, 2016, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2010/04/12/why-publishers-brands-matter/>

Publishers can begin by leveraging their greatest asset — their authors — to shape their brand identities in consumers' eyes. This gives customers an idea of an imprint's character while highlighting publishers' rich editorial heritage and professional expertise in acquiring, editing, and promoting books.⁷

The three types of literary programming selected for this research represent just a few of the ways that book publishers have found to appeal to authors directly, and plenty of industry insiders have speculated and explain the particular appeal of this “books plus” approach. Though the operation of additional publications almost certainly requires extra hours, extra resources, and extra work that publishers of books only do not need to expend, this type of program is considered an investment by many publishers. As Nick Mulgrew explains, literary journals are places where writers can test their skills, push boundaries, and gain readers and reputations in a space that welcomes this sort of experimentation, particularly early on in the careers of writers who might go on to shape literature: “Knowing that you are being invested in by people who have much better things to do than patronise you is usually the thing – and I know this from experience – that drives you on to more ambitious projects.”⁸ Workshops and writing contests work in much the same way, and have the added benefit for publishers of a kind of tip off about new talent.⁹ In this way, the additional resources publishers might expend to facilitate these types of writer-oriented programming are potentially set up to reward publishers economically and with cultural capital later on, by helping them identify and cultivate writers under the express guidance of their brand and editorial staff and eliminating at least some of the

⁷ William Kingsland and Rakesh Satyal, “Why Book Publishers Need to Think Like Amazon,” *Publishing Perspectives*, March 17, 2014, Accessed April 25, 2016.

⁸ Nick Mulgrew, “Literary Magazines as Training Grounds for Readers, Writers and Publishers,” *Publishing Perspectives*, January 12, 2016, Accessed April 26, 2016,

<http://publishingperspectives.com/2016/01/nick-mulgrew-on-literary-magazines-training-grounds/#.VzH78GQrLq0>

⁹ Claire Kirch, “Graywolf Goes Public With Literary Magazine,” *Publishers Weekly*, February 28, 2012, Accessed April 26, 2016,

<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/50821-graywolf-goes-public-with-literary-magazine.html>

risk associated with publishing the book of a new and totally unknown writer. This absolutely goes for contests and literary awards as well:

Books have become luxury items and each publication is a major risk for publishers. Even if the advance paid is small, there are all the costs involved in getting the book to market – and in the case of international publishers, there are the substantial translation costs to factor in as well. What publishers are looking for is some guarantee that a book will sell – and recognition from these prizes and the uplift in sales we see because of them in the UK, is a good indicator that the book will stand a fair chance of success wherever it is published.”¹⁰

RESEARCH METHODS

The research for this project was conducted in several parts: I identified a number of publishers with fairly typical books-only publishing business models, and a number of publishers that offer additional programming as part of their brand, including those offering 1) workshops, 2) writing contests, and 3) additional non-book publications. Most of the publishers examined in this research are small to medium independent publishers of literary fiction (although many of them publish poetry, nonfiction, short story collections, and other types of work in addition to literary fiction) and publish at least a few titles per season, some as few as 2-3 titles, and others upwards of 10. In their mission statements, many of the publishers express a commitment to publishing new authors, work that is innovative or ambitious and/or considered to be less mainstream, and work that exemplifies a particular artistic aesthetic that is in some way unique to the press. Additionally, many but not all of the publishers included in this research are

¹⁰ Cathryn Summerhayes, “How Book Prizes Boost Literary Talent Internationally,” *Publishing Perspectives*, July 29, 2014, Accessed April 26, 2016, <http://publishingperspectives.com/2014/07/how-book-prizes-boost-literary-talent-internationally/#.VzJMxGQrLq0>

nonprofits, some are housed in universities, and a handful are imprints or affiliates of larger publishers.

In the first portion of the study, I took a social media audit of each publisher to compare basic statistics on their social media reach. This included a count of followers on Twitter and Page Likes on Facebook, and a comparison of how often each publisher used social media to message on different topics in a set time period. The primary goal was to determine if there is a detectable difference in the social media reach of publishers with additional branded literary programming. Follower and Page Like counts offer a way to begin quantifying the number of readers, customers, and supporters who have made the choice to connect with a publisher on social media platforms and to opt in to receiving their online messaging.

For the second portion, I selected a title from the backlist of each publisher that was released in 2015 and used this as a case study. With the caveat that every book is different and not all publishers are publishing true comp titles during the same period, I attempted to choose case study titles that were similar in pub date and genre (largely novels and literary fiction). I gathered sales data about each title from Nielsen BookScan to identify how many copies have sold to date for each, and conducted research to determine how many book reviews and media attention these titles received - including book reviews and interviews conducted with external media outlets. For control, I collected review data from the first 2 pages of results on a Google search.

The third portion of my research involved an audit of the publicity and press received by publishers independent of their books. This audit was fairly light, but included a search for articles, press releases, interviews, and other publicity items published by external sources (including newspapers, magazines, and other media not related to the publisher, but excluding personal blogs, social media, and online customer-review platforms). This audit searched for

examples of publicity received by the publishing house itself rather than any of their books or authors specifically, and searched for examples of press items that relate to such subjects as the publishers' missions and goals, their impact on certain literary communities or the industry at large, celebrations of their longevity and hard work, mentions of their additional literary programming, and (occasionally) discussions of publishers' challenges. To accomplish this and control for some consistency, the press items were identified in the first 2-3 pages of results for Google searches of "[publisher name] in the press." This process was conducted for each of the presses. *The data collected regarding publisher social media reach, case study title sales, and publisher publicity can be found in the Appendix.*

RESULTS

Workshops (And Beyond)

The impact of workshops proved to be the most elusive of the literary programs studied and compared in this research. This is not to say that there aren't any book publishers who facilitate workshops, or even that there aren't many - but many of the publishers who do also seemed to include either writing contests or additional non-book publications or both as part of their programming. This demographic morphed somewhat into a "Workshops and Beyond" category, and though it is likely impossible to separate the impact of the workshops specifically on economic and cultural capital, the four publishers studied can still offer very useful insight about how additional programming and the diversification of a publisher's non-book offerings can work to boost its profile and strengthen its brand.

These publishers, which include Tin House, Catapult, and Tupelo Press, have accrued notably social media followings than their counterparts who publish books only and those publishers whose additional programming may be more limited (e.g. they have a journal but no

writing contest, etc.). They were also much more likely to receive publicity and press attention for their collective contributions than the other publishers in the study. The case study titles for the Workshops and Beyond publishers indicate stronger sales per title correlate to wider social media reach, with the curious exception of Catapult. The case study title selected from Catapult, *Mrs. Engels* by Gavin McCrea (published October 2015), has curiously sold more units than Catapult has Facebook fans.

Writing Contests

Of the three literary programs selected for this study, writing contests were the most prevalent, the easiest to identify, the the type of programming most likely to be the only additional literary offering. In retrospect, this makes sense for many reasons - of the three, writing contests likely require far fewer resources and are less likely to disrupt the day-to-day of the primary activity of publishing books. In a way, it seems like the gateway drug to additional programming for publishers. One of the more interesting data trends for writing contests is the frequency with which the case study books from publishers with writing contests received book reviews. Some of the publishers in the selection publish only a few titles per year and collection all of their manuscripts via their writing contests, and so it is safe to assume that whatever book was published was in fact the cream of the crop for contest submissions that period; others publishers may publish their contest and award-winners in addition to their regularly received and solicited manuscripts, and not all case study titles in this research were necessarily winners of the publisher's contest. Though this is the case, it seems that the books by publishers who facilitate contests received consistently more book reviews by external media sources; there is perhaps something to be said for publishers who make strong statements about their missions to seek out and publish emerging writers and those who might be too risky for mainstream

publishing. It might be interesting in future studies to determine if publishers who can demonstrate that they've followed through on their mission to find these voices in innovative ways (such as contests) are somehow reaping extra cultural capital in the form of extra attention and affirmation from the media.

Non-Book Publications

Taken as a whole, the data collected on the performance of book publishers who also invest resources in additional publications indicates that this type of programming has a positive impact both economically and culturally. Though the publishers

Two Dollar Radio is perhaps the best example of this impact in action: though they have a modest social media reach, Two Dollar Radio received far more (and far more diverse) press attention for their work as publishers than any of the other publishers studied. Press for Two Dollar Radio included articles and interviews heaping praise on their innovations and exploring the nuances of the mission that drives their books, their journal, and the other projects that this small but busy press has worked to produce. The cultural capital that these sorts of acknowledgements have has perhaps paid off, as the sales for Two Dollar Radio's case study title were reasonably strong even when compared to larger publishers like Tin House who also maintain a journal.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this research focuses on the impact of a very particular set of literary programming that publishers offer to bolster their brands and expand their audiences, it leaves many other types of programming unexplored. Workshops, writing contests, and additional publications are all similar in that they focus on the writing and content-generation part of the publishing process. Further research into the impact of branded literary programming on the economic and cultural

capital of publishers might do well to focus next on programming that is geared directly towards readers. Branded innovations such as podcasts, blogs, and book clubs are offered by many publishers as a way to entice readers into engaging more deeply with (and buying) their books, and it seems probable that a similar investigation into literary programming geared straight towards a consumer crowd might reveal interesting patterns in their sales and in their overall brand recognition. The economic and cultural capital impact of non-book merchandise (things like clothing, gear, toys, and gifts) might also be a useful variable to study further. Several of the case study publishers cited here do offer branded non-book merchandise that either relates to their books, stories, and characters specifically or to the publishing house, its mission, and their community. It would be interested to perform a similar audit of sales and publicity reach of publishers utilizing these strategies.

Given the revelation that some of the more successful-seeming publishers in this study were the ones who incorporated multiple additional non-book programs into their branded offerings, it also seems that it might also be worthwhile to take a closer researcher's look at a wider selection of publishers who are using more than one of these methods to build brand. Ellen Harvey writes often on "beyond the book" strategies employed by book publishers, and predicts that this will become more common and even essential as the publishing industry grows and modernizes: "That idea of becoming a comprehensive resource — a place where consumers can find everything they want about a certain topic, not just books — is growing in popularity among publishers."¹¹ This is particularly clear in the case of publishers like Catapult and the "literary aggregation" site Literary Hub, which are new to the publishing scene and in many ways have worked to decentralized the prominence of the book in order to champion the prominence of the community that accompanies them. As Jonny Diamond of Literary Hub

¹¹ Ellen Harvey, "Publishers' Sites Are Going Beyond Books," *Book Business*, September 4, 2015, Accessed May 5, 2016. <http://www.bookbusinessmag.com/article/publishers-sites-going-beyond-books/>

frames it: “above all else, [Lit Hub] will have a consistent, recognizable voice – a personality – and will be a place readers can return to each day for the best of the literary web.”¹² If cultural capital comes in part from this type of successful branding that hooks readers by building trust and “personality,” and if the publishers working to extend this personality to other additional must-have programs are truly succeeding through successful brand storytelling as this early research indicates, it will probably be useful to examine the phenomenons deeper and continue building an understanding of how and why they work so well together.

Economic impact is fairly easy to detect and illustrate with the right tools, though the sales data provided by Nielsen Bookscan is admittedly not a complete picture of all sales for all books. However, it is much easier in theory to compare the sales data for books released by different publishers with different business models, programs, and investment in their brands and thereby develop a map of the economic impact these things have on a publisher’s bottom line. Impact on cultural capital is much more difficult to detect. This research attempts to triangulate the impact of branded literary programming on cultural capital by analyzing several different variables that may contribute to cultural capital. If cultural capital connotes some level of reputation and brand recognition that is valuable to a publisher in a way that is independent of actual sales numbers, then there are likely a number of different ways to gauge it.

One way that might be fruitful for future research into the impact of literary programming on cultural capital would be an extensive polling of consumers (readers, writers, and literary community members all) to determine if publishers who offer workshops, writing contests, and additional publications under the brand are more recognizable to a wider audience, and if any part of that recognition can be directly linked to those programs. In the early stages of research for this project, I attempted to conduct surveys with publishers to see if they could offer any

¹² Dennis Abrams, “Publishers Team Up for New Digital Literary Aggregation Site,” *Publishing Perspectives*, February 10, 2015, Accessed April 26, 2016, <http://publishingperspectives.com/2015/02/publishers-team-new-digital-literary-aggregation-site/#.VzJM32QrLq0>

insight into how they viewed their additional programming as contributing to their brand, building their community, and possibly adding benefits of cultural capital that are otherwise difficult to account for with sales numbers. Ultimately, this survey received few responses back from publishers within the necessary time frame, and there were not enough responses to demonstrate anything definitive about the impact publishers believe these programs have on their business. That said, the responses collected suggested that publishers who do offer these programs have strong opinions about what additional non-book programming contributes to their brands. Future studies (perhaps with more response time flexibility) might be able to make more progress surveying publishers about their additional branded programming and gather more information about the cultural capital publishers feel they reap for their efforts.

CONCLUSION

Though I initially set out to make firm comparisons between publishers who offer these programs as a branded extension of themselves and publishers who are strictly books-only, one of the first discoveries I made in my data collection was that the differences in the impact of these programs was small but distinct enough that comparing each demographic chunk to a similar chunk of traditional publishers did not actually yield much new information. The differences between the programs in the publishers I had already identified seemed to be much more meaningful than the comparisons I could make to a blind group of similar-seeming publishers with no other programs at all. The more that I researched and attempted to build out data sets based on these programs, the more it seemed clear that these publishers are doing something very different, and trying to reconcile the impact of a writing contest or a workshop to an absence seemed a bit like comparing apples and oranges. As such, the trends identified in

my results section are representative less of the differences between programs and no programs, and is a perhaps more useful exploration of the differences between programs.

While the importance of economic capital is fairly straightforward in any business and fairly simple to measure with the appropriate data access, cultural capital is a far more difficult variable to measure. In concluding this report on the impact of branded literary programming offered by publishers in addition to their books, it is important to bear in mind that cultural capital can present in a wide variety of ways, and may indeed be measured differently by different publishers. The value added by such programs as workshops, literary magazines or journals, and writing contests are very subjective and; without a way to contextualize what it might mean to a publisher that they have reached a certain number of fans of Twitter or received recognition for their work in particular circles, it is difficult to truly say what impact anything has had a cultural capital. Though these ways of measuring cultural capital can offer legitimate insights, I think it is important to remember that they only reveal parts of the impact that workshops, contests, and additional publications can have on a publisher's brand and business. Rather than demonstrating any deep trends or mathematically significant revelations, I believe that the data collected here shows the breadth of possibility that these programs can bring to innovative publishers; it cannot provide a formula or tried-and-true guide to success, but it can be taken as an encouraging indication that these programs can have a positive impact on publishing business models.

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