

9-1-1976

# Role of the Publisher in the Dissemination of Knowledge

Gordon B. Neavill

Wayne State University, [neavill@wayne.edu](mailto:neavill@wayne.edu)

---

## Recommended Citation

Neavill, G. B. (1976). Role of the publisher in the dissemination of knowledge. In P. G. Altbach and S. McVey (Eds.), *Perspectives on Publishing* (pp. 47-57). Lexington, MS: Lexington Books.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/slisfrp/45>

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Library and Information Science at DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Library and Information Science Faculty Research Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.

# Perspectives on Publishing

Edited by

**Philip G. Altbach**  
State University of  
New York at Buffalo

**Sheila McVey**  
Boston College

**Lexington Books**  
D.C. Heath and Company  
Lexington, Massachusetts  
Toronto                      London

5022.  
Z  
257  
3-5

**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

Main entry under title:

Perspectives on publishing.

Includes index.

1. Publishers and publishing—Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Altbach, Philip G. II. McVey, Sheila.

Z278.P47 070.5 75-3516

ISBN 0-669-99564-9

*Copyright © 1976 by D.C. Heath and Company.*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published simultaneously in Canada.

Printed in the United States of America.

International Standard Book Number: 0-669-99564-9

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 75-3516

WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES 300 95-77

# 5

## Role of the Publisher in the Dissemination of Knowledge

Gordon B. Neavill

Transmission of intellectual works from their producers to consumers is what is meant in this article by the dissemination of knowledge. Intellectual works can be disseminated in various ways. In nonliterate societies, the only means by which constructs of words and ideas can be disseminated is recitation, either by itself or coupled with performance. With the advent of writing, these constructs can be recorded and disseminated in physical form. Publication, involving the reproduction of recorded works in multiple copies and the distribution of these copies to consumers, becomes in literate societies a major mode of the dissemination of knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

The publisher has three basic functions in this process: he decides, by assessing both the needs of consumers and the works which have been produced, what he will publish; he controls and supervises the reproduction of these works; and he starts the copies off through some system of distribution.<sup>1</sup> In performing these functions the publisher influences the production, as well as the consumption, of knowledge. This article examines the publisher's role at each of the five stages of dissemination: production, assessment, reproduction, distribution, and consumption.

### Production

Intellectual works are not produced in a vacuum. The producers of intellectual works need some means of access to the works of their predecessors and contemporaries, and they need some means of disseminating to others the works which they produce. The publisher forms an important part of the institutional setting in which authorship takes place. In modern times, as Edward Shils has noted, the producers of intellectual works maintain contact with their traditions partly through the complex of auxiliary intellectual institutions—such as publishing, bookshops, libraries, journals, and book reviewing—which surround them.<sup>2</sup> They also rely on these institutions to transmit their works to consumers. The

<sup>3</sup>This definition embraces the publication of both pictorial statements and sound recordings. This discussion, however, is limited to the publication of written works. Moreover, the focus is specifically on the publication of books, though much of what is said is relevant also to periodical publication.

desire that a work ultimately be made available to an audience is nearly always inherent in its creation. Also, authors usually seek some form of remuneration for their work. The composition of the audience, its interests, what existing intellectual institutions are able and willing to disseminate, and the prevailing patterns of remuneration affect what is written at any given period. The Victorian three-decker novel is an example of this.

Publishers also directly influence the content of what is written. The most pervasive and direct way the publisher can influence this is to conceive of a work himself and commission an author to write it. The publisher must be aware of both what authors are writing and what readers want and need. When works for which a potential audience exists are not being produced, the publisher may commission them. This probably occurs most frequently where publishing is highly developed; but it can be especially important where traditions of authorship are not firmly established.<sup>3</sup>

It appears to be increasingly common for works to have their genesis in publishers' rather than in authors' minds. It would be interesting to see some statistics indicating the percentage of works in different fields that originate in this way. According to one leading American publisher, "The practice of developing ideas in editorial departments, then finding authors to do them on assignment, has, I should think, doubled since the 1920s. Some of our most successful books are developed in this manner, and it is doubtful if many successful publishers' lists could exist without them."<sup>4</sup>

Some kinds of works are more commonly commissioned than others. According to Farrar, "While an editor does occasionally present a writer with a plot or theme for a novel, most of his own planning of books is done in nonfiction. Specialized nonfiction lists need much more inside-the-house planning than the general trade list."<sup>5</sup> Scientists and engineers, for instance, whose natural medium is the scientific article, often have to be badgered by publishers into writing books. Commercial publishers tend to commission works far more frequently than do university presses. Books intended for inclusion in a series are commonly commissioned, and those intended for series which cover their subjects in a specific number of volumes, each of which is conceived in relation to the others, almost invariably have to be commissioned.

Whether or not a work is commissioned, the publisher at the editorial stage is likely to recommend changes in the form or content of a work which he is interested in publishing. The number of published works whose content is identical to that of the submitted manuscript is probably very small. These changes range from minor alterations in grammar, spelling, and phrasing introduced by copy editors to large scale, fundamental revisions.

Authors frequently grumble about the changes which editors urge them to make; yet most authors expect and desire editorial assistance from their publishers and justifiably feel cheated if they fail to get it. It is a rare manuscript that the attention of an intelligent editor cannot improve. The editor is deeply

involved with the work and brings a fresh perspective to it. Faults which remain hidden to the author may be apparent to the editor; problems which the author has been unable to resolve may yield to another point of view. Sometimes editors have worked closely with authors, helping them to shape difficult manuscripts into publishable form.

Ideally, the purpose of changes recommended at the editorial stage is better to realize the objectives of the author. A conscientious editor attempts to see the work from the author's point of view. Many of the revisions he suggests are intended to facilitate the dissemination of the work to its audience.<sup>6</sup> The editor may have a clearer conception than the author of what is needed to communicate the author's message effectively. Suggestions for revisions are likely to be helpful to the author as long as the author and his publisher are seeking the same audience. But if a publisher tries to steer the work toward an audience different from that sought by the author—recommending, for example, that the author tone down controversial statements or that he enhance the work's commercial appeal at the expense of its artistic or intellectual integrity—irreconcilable conflicts almost certainly arise. Usually, the author may accept or reject changes suggested by the editor as he sees fit. Sometimes, however, publication is contingent on their being made. When this happens, the author faces the dilemma of going ahead with publication at the cost of unwelcome changes in his text, or seeking out a publisher whose conception of the audience is closer to his own.

Normally, intellectual production requires both periods of solitude and periods of conviviality. Most writers probably need contact and interaction with other authors and with their audiences. But not all writers form themselves into bohémias or live in literary or intellectual centers. Even where the possibility of contact exists, it is often too shallow in practice to be rewarding. For some authors, contact with the editor may serve in part as a surrogate for broader contact with colleagues and readers. The editor occupies a unique position, combining in his role the points of view of both author and audience. He understands the problems of authorship, and it is his job to devote sustained, careful attention to the author's work. Many authors need the advice, prodding, and encouragement the editor provides. For younger and inexperienced authors, the editor can be an invaluable tutor in the craft or writing. Contact between authors and editors can be an important part of the creative process. This nurturing of authors is no small part of the publisher's contribution to the production of knowledge.

## Assessment

Not all manuscripts produced by authors are published. It is the responsibility of the publisher to decide which manuscripts submitted to him will be accepted for

publication and which will be rejected. Here the publisher plays the role of a gatekeeper, determining which works produced by authors will be made available to consumers.<sup>b</sup> The rejection rate is often very high. According to William Jovanovich, a major trade publisher in New York may accept only one of fifty manuscripts offered him.<sup>7</sup> More specialized and less well-known publishers may have lower rejection rates, and manuscripts rejected by one publisher may be accepted by another. But if no publisher is willing to publish a manuscript, its progress along the stages of dissemination almost inevitably comes to an abrupt halt.

It is crucial to the dissemination of knowledge that all manuscripts submitted to publishers should not be accepted. If all manuscripts were assured of publication, the channels of dissemination would be glutted with works possessing neither intrinsic merit nor commercial potential, and works for which an audience did exist would sink beneath their weight. As it is, the number of titles published annually in the United States has risen during the past fifteen years from 15,000 to more than 40,000. Many of these are mediocre works of marginal interest. The dissemination of knowledge might well be improved if publishers accepted fewer manuscripts than they do at present.<sup>8</sup>

It is, of course, also crucial to the dissemination of knowledge that works which merit publication on the basis of their content not be rejected. The criteria upon which publishers base their decisions at the stage of assessment are clearly of great importance and interest.

In the United States there are hundreds of publishers, and new publishing houses are constantly being established. Probably no two of these have identical sets of criteria for assessing manuscripts. Some publishers eagerly accept anything that seems likely to earn a profit. Others, commercial as well as nonprofit publishers, maintain high standards of quality and reject any manuscript, regardless of its commercial potential, that fails to meet them. Nearly all publishers specialize to some extent, and most reject manuscripts that fall outside the range and type of works associated with their imprint, no matter how good or well-suited to the lists of other publishers they may be. The diversity of publishers in itself greatly enhances the chances of a worthwhile manuscript's finding a publisher.

For all publishers, the decision to accept or reject a manuscript is in part an economic decision. This is true for commercial and nonprofit publishers alike. Commercial publishers have to earn a profit. Nonprofit publishers have to avoid going into the red, or, if they are lucky enough to have a subsidy, to keep their losses within its bounds. No publisher can accept manuscripts without taking into account the financial consequences of their publication.

<sup>b</sup>The publisher, it should be remembered, is by no means a passive gatekeeper, content merely to pass judgment on manuscripts as they are submitted to him. When he is dissatisfied with the traffic arriving at his portals of its own volition, he actively solicits works more to his liking.

The costs of publishing a book are not difficult to estimate. It is much harder to predict the amount of income a book is likely to bring. This depends largely on the response of the public. The anticipated behavior of the public is the most crucial element affecting the publisher's decision at the stage of assessment. It is upon this that all economic considerations affecting publication hinge—not only whether to publish a manuscript, but also how many copies to print, what retail price to set, and the like.

For highly specialized books, the publisher may have a fairly accurate conception of the potential market. The broader the anticipated audience becomes, however, the more difficult it is to foretell the response. The tastes of the public are shifting and unpredictable. Surprisingly little is known about the actual audience with which the publisher of general books must deal. The publisher knows how many copies of previous books have been sold, but he rarely knows who bought them or why. The publisher's assessment of the response of his anticipated audience to a general book is based on an awareness of what the public needs, a sense of what it is ready for and what it is tired of, informed guesswork, experience, and a possibly irrational degree of optimism. It is ultimately the publisher's conception of the audience—accurate or inaccurate—that determines the fate of a manuscript offered to him.

Partly because the response of the public to a book is so difficult to predict, a high percentage of the manuscripts that are accepted fail to recover the total costs of their publication.<sup>9</sup> The publication of these books is, in essence, subsidized. University presses and other nonprofit publishers may receive these subsidies from their sponsoring institutions or elsewhere. Commercial publishers—and increasingly, nonprofit publishers as well—have to generate their own. The profits from commercially successful books carry the failures, and the profits from one smash best seller can carry a whole publishing firm for a season. The difficulty of predicting which works will subsidize the others is one reason publishers accept as many manuscripts as they do.

Sometimes commercial publishers deliberately accept manuscripts which they anticipate will be unprofitable. There are excellent reasons for this. Few authors begin their careers with books that are financially successful. A publisher may accept the work of a promising young author in the hope that, after being nurtured through one or more financially or artistically unsuccessful books, the author will develop his potential as a writer, gain recognition and popularity, and produce works that are profitable. In this situation the publisher's commitment of funds to a commercially unsuccessful book can be seen as an investment. It is a risky investment, but it is one which must be made if the publisher is to be assured of a flow of potentially profitable manuscripts in the future.<sup>c</sup>

Finally, some manuscripts may be accepted even though their publication

<sup>c</sup>Of course, if the author changes publishers just as he starts becoming profitable, the profits may fall to a rival publisher. Publishers naturally hope to reap the rewards of their own investments, but in practice they often reap the rewards of each other's.

cannot be justified in economic terms at all. The simple fact that making worthwhile works available to the public is part of the publisher's job can be, at least for some publishers, a compelling influence at the stage of assessment. Publishers often issue works of limited appeal, such as poetry, knowing that their only return will be the prestige gained for the firm and the satisfaction of having contributed to literature or scholarship.

## Reproduction

Once the publisher has accepted a manuscript, and any changes in its content as agreed upon by the author and editor have been made, the work is ready to be reproduced. The basis of a work's existence is transformed when it is reproduced in multiple copies. An unpublished manuscript remains wholly under the control of its author. Its content remains at least potentially in a state of flux, subject to alteration at any time. Because an unpublished work exists in a very small number of copies, it is vulnerable to accidental destruction or loss. An unpublished work is not accessible to the public at large; moreover, the public usually does not even know that it exists.

All this is changed when a work is reproduced in multiple copies and the copies are distributed. The work then assumes a life of its own. It becomes publicly accessible and its existence is made known. It may achieve widespread and lasting popularity, or it may sink from active possession and survive only as a physical object in libraries and on the back shelves of secondhand bookstores. In either case, the work has entered into the stock of knowledge generally available to mankind. As long as a work is unpublished (unless the manuscript is acquired and catalogued by a library), it remains outside this stock of knowledge.

The publisher's role at the reproduction stage is not limited to making works accessible to the public. Here it is necessary to make a distinction between the *work*, the creation of the author, and the *book*, the particular format or edition in which the work is reproduced. The publisher must decide what kind of book he is going to make from the work. This decision is shaped by the nature of the work itself and by the kind of audience the publisher hopes to reach. Sometimes the publisher must choose from a multiplicity of possible audiences and formats. William Morris's Kelmscott *Chaucer* and a paperback edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, for instance, are the same work, in radically different formats, aimed at wholly different audiences. With a work like *Robinson Crusoe*, the publisher's options are almost limitless. He must decide whether he wants the book to appeal to adults or to juveniles; he can produce an edition for a popular audience or an edition for scholars; he can embellish the work with an introduction, illustrations, or explanatory notes. He can even tamper with the work itself, abridging it, simplifying or modernizing its language, or translating it. The

publisher's decisions in these matters largely determine how and by whom the work will be consumed.

In all cases, a book must be designed. The physical manufacture of books is not part of the publishing function, and most publishers today employ outside printers and binders to perform these operations. But it is part of the publisher's function to supervise and control the reproduction of the work. The publisher has the responsibility of designing the layout, title page, dust jacket, and binding. He chooses the style and size of type, selects the paper, and specifies the methods of composition and presswork to be used. These decisions do not affect the content of the work but they can affect in subtle ways how the book will be perceived and consumed—even whether it will reach the audience for which it is intended. The differences that a decision to issue a work as a paperback can make in patterns of consumption is only the most dramatic example of this.

Finally, knowledge is affected at the stage of reproduction by the errors that seem inevitably to creep in whenever a text is reproduced. From the hand copyists of the ancient world to the latest computer composition techniques of today, the reproduction of texts has always involved the introduction of error. It is the responsibility of the publisher (and the printer and author) to eliminate as many of these errors as possible. Conscientious proofreading can greatly reduce the number of errors introduced at this stage, yet almost always some errors remain. Usually they are not as serious as in the so-called Wicked Bible of 1631, in which the "not" was omitted from the Seventh Commandment.

## **Distribution**

After a book has been manufactured, copies must be distributed to consumers. Getting books from the publisher's warehouse into the hands of book buyers is a complicated problem, involving not only distribution across geographical space, but also distribution to different groups of readers. Strictly speaking, the publisher is not responsible for distribution. The publishing function is completed once the publisher starts a book off through some system of distribution, and the rest of the job is up to the distributive agencies of the book trade. Nevertheless, the publisher retains considerable influence at the stage of distribution. Sometimes, due to the inability of the existing distributive agencies to reach all potential consumers, the publisher assumes responsibility for distribution himself.

A book's potential geographical market consists of wherever the language in which it is published is read. Artificial barriers to the dissemination of knowledge, such as tariffs and censorship, sometimes restrict the distribution of books within their potential market areas; and publishers sometimes agree to divide responsibility for a large language area, as British and American publishers

have done. The market area can be further circumscribed by inadequate transportation facilities. This obstacle to distribution significantly influenced the development of American publishing in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,<sup>10</sup> and it remains a problem in many developing countries today.

The effectiveness of distribution within the actual market area is determined largely by the existing agencies of book distribution. These include traditional bookstores, book departments in general purpose stores, bookstalls in mass market outlets, and book clubs.<sup>d</sup> The traditional bookstore is potentially the best of these. It distributes the widest selection of books, customers can examine books which interest them, and by browsing among the books on display they can learn about new books. Moreover, booksellers are usually willing to order titles not in stock. Well-stocked bookstores, however, are rarely found outside the larger cities and university towns. In many communities consumers do not have access to bookstores at all. Book clubs and paperback bookstalls, on the other hand, make books available to consumers in every community. These are capable of distributing only a small fraction of the titles published, however. It appears to be possible to extend distribution to all consumers within a large market area only at the cost of severely restricting the range of books distributed.

This dilemma confronts the publisher when he attempts to assume responsibility for distribution himself. Publishers can distribute books to geographically dispersed consumers by direct mail or by hiring book agents to contact potential consumers in person. Both methods can reach consumers throughout the market area, but neither is capable of distributing a wide range of titles. Book agents are most effective at promoting a single title at a time, and today they are used primarily to distribute encyclopedias and other expensive reference sets. Direct mail is suited to the distribution of a limited range of books of extremely broad appeal, such as those published by Time-Life Books and American Heritage Press, and it has also been used effectively by university presses and publishers of professional books to distribute highly specialized books to specific, clearly definable audiences. Direct mail does not appear to have great potential for the distribution of other types of books.

Except where publishers assume responsibility for distribution themselves, the first step in the geographic distribution of books is through the channels of the book trade. It is important that the publishing and distributive branches of the book industry function smoothly together. The publisher must inform booksellers of the availability of new books. Here publishers' traveling sales representatives play an extremely important role, as do catalogs and advertising in book trade journals.<sup>11</sup> The discount allowed to the retailer—which ranges in the United States from 20 to more than 40 percent—and the publisher's policies

<sup>d</sup>Libraries are distribution agencies of great importance to the dissemination of knowledge, but as far as the publisher is concerned, the library is a consumer like any other book buyer, albeit an extremely important one.

on the return of unsold books for credit also influence which titles booksellers order and display.<sup>12</sup> Because no bookseller can stock all of the books in print, the distribution of many titles depends on the willingness of booksellers to make special orders for books not in stock. Whether publishers respond readily or reluctantly to single copy orders is an important factor in book distribution—as is the speed and efficiency with which they fill orders generally. The publisher's policies in these matters can affect the selection of books which the consumer is able to obtain through local retail outlets.

The publisher is also involved in the distribution of books to different groups of readers. The cost of books is one aspect of this. The paperback revolution, launched by the British publisher Allen Lane with the founding of Penguin Books in 1935, has had an enormous impact on the dissemination of knowledge, not only making books readily available in all communities, but also bringing them easily within the reach of all economic groups. Another important aspect of distribution to different groups of readers is informing potential consumers about books likely to be of interest to them. This is largely the publisher's responsibility, as part of his function of starting books off through some system of distribution. The publisher sends review copies of books to those reviewing media most likely to be seen by the book's potential audience. Advertising, direct mail announcements, and other promotional efforts are also directed toward particular groups of consumers. Display in shops, important as it is, is no substitute for these more institutionalized means of informing potential consumers about books. The kind of send-off which the publisher gives a book may well determine whether it reaches the audience for which it is intended.

An excellent example of the effect of marketing is the sales history of the recent best seller, Richard Adams's *Watership Down*, a fantasy concerning rabbits. It was written and first published in England as a book for juveniles, where it won the leading British awards for children's books. It was acquired for American publication by the children's book editor at Macmillan. Then within the publishing house it was decided that the work could appeal to the kind of adult audience that responded to J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. It was published and distributed in the United States as an adult book, while appearing simultaneously on Macmillan's children's list. As an adult book it became the second best-selling novel of 1974. Had it been published solely as a children's book, its audience would have been very different and far fewer copies would have been sold.

Finally, the publisher can facilitate distribution by issuing some books in series. One of the inherent problems of publishing is that each title normally constitutes a separate product that must be produced and marketed on its own. This problem is somewhat mitigated when a title is published in a series. Inclusion in a series helps tag a book that might otherwise be lost in a sea of individual titles and gives it a slight headstart in gaining audience attention.

## Consumption

The consumption of books involves two stages. First, the book must be acquired through some system of distribution. Here the consumer can be an individual or an institution. After its initial purchase, the book can be resold or lent to others, but the publisher's direct involvement in its dissemination ends with the book's original sale to a consumer. Only after the book has been acquired can it be read by an individual. This is the second stage of consumption, and it completes the process of dissemination that began with the production of the work by the author.

The publisher's influence on consumption is indirect, deriving from his role at the stages of production, assessment, reproduction, and distribution. This influence is very great; however, it is limited by the consumer himself. The publisher may be able to spot developing interests and trends before the consumer himself is aware of them, and to supply books to serve these needs. By making certain kinds of books available, it may be possible for the publisher to sustain and nurture interests that might otherwise wither or never blossom at all. But the publisher cannot make consumers buy books they do not want or read books which do not interest them.

In the dissemination of knowledge, the publisher's influence on the consumer is probably matched or surpassed by the consumer's influence on the publisher. The publisher's eyes are constantly on the audience. At every stage of dissemination, the publisher's decisions and actions are based on his conception of the audience and how he thinks it will behave.

## Notes

1. This is based on the definition of the publisher's functions in O.H. Cheney, *Economic Survey of the Book Industry 1930-1931* (New York: National Association of Book Publishers, 1931), p. 154.

2. Edward Shils, "Intellectuals, Tradition, and the Traditions of Intellectuals: Some Preliminary Considerations," *Daedalus* 101 (Spring 1972): 24-25.

3. See the symposium "'Creative Publishing': Is It Proper for University Presses?" *Scholarly Publishing* 4 (1973): 321-32.

4. John Farrar, "Selecting and Securing the Manuscript," in *What Happens in Book Publishing*, ed. by Chandler B. Grannis, 2d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 32.

5. Farrar, "Selecting and Securing," p. 33.

6. Publishers of transatlantic reprints have sometimes carried this to extremes, rather foolishly altering passages which they thought would bewilder or offend the work's new audience. See, Matthew J. Brucoli, "Some Transatlantic Texts: West to East," in *Bibliography and Textual Criticism*, ed. O.M. Brack, Jr. and Warner Barnes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 244-55.

7. William Jovanovich, *Now, Barabbas* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 86.

8. See John P. Dessauer, "Too Many Books?" *Publishers Weekly*, (September 30, 1974, pp. 24-25; October 7, 1974, pp. 34-35; October 14, 1974, pp. 32-33).

9. See Dan Lacy, "The Economics of Publishing, or Adam Smith and Literature," *Daedalus* (Winter 1963): 42-62.

10. See William Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America 1790-1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), pp. 17-37.

11. See Bruce Bliven, Jr., *Book Traveller* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1975); originally published in the *New Yorker* 49, no. 38 (November 12, 1973), p. 51 ff.

12. Booksellers are generally reluctant to stock and display books carrying less than a trade discount of about 40 percent, though they are usually willing to make special orders for books carrying a short discount of 20 percent. A publisher determines a book's discount—and thereby the manner of its distribution—according to his conception of the nature of its potential audience. Most books are assured of a certain minimum sale without bookstore display to libraries and individuals as a result of announcements and reviews. For highly specialized books with a well-defined audience, this minimum sale may constitute more than 95 percent of the total potential sale. When setting the discount on a book, the publisher tries to estimate whether the income from its total potential sale at a trade discount would offset that from its likely minimum sale at a short discount. See Abbot M. Friedland, "Book Distribution, Discounts, and Dollar Sales," *Scholarly Publishing* 4 (1973): 153-61.