

PREFACE

The one question that has sparked more debate in U.S. book publishing circles, ever since the first book was printed and published in what is now Massachusetts in 1639, has been, Is publishing a cultural or a commercial endeavor?

That question prodded us to spend almost three years investigating the eclectic, dynamic book-publishing industry. We profited from innumerable discussions, some in person and some on the telephone, with hundreds of editors, publishers, sales representatives, and other people in book publishing. We visited commercial and scholarly publishing houses and publishing executives in New York City, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Kansas City, Atlanta, San Antonio, Austin, Denver, and in many other cities. We visited book warehouses, printing plants (both lithographic and print on demand), and hundreds (and at times it seemed as if it were thousands) of bookstores. We talked with reporters from major newspapers in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., etc. We discussed book publishing with reporters at the Associated Press, Reuters, Bloomberg, and elsewhere. We had numerous discussions with individuals who covered this industry at various Wall Street financial firms and hedge funds. We talked with authors, agents, book industry trade association leaders, and researchers at a number of book industry firms.

We also had the opportunity to read substantive papers and books about publishing, leading to frequent discussions with fellow academics in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Asia who were also interested in this industry.

It has been quite an education, filled with probing analyses of a myriad of statistical data sets (sometimes a bit daunting), great talks with really interesting people (who were eager to talk on and sometimes off the record—in one instance, an individual insisted on taping our discussion), and a few disappointments. This is a complex, adaptive business, evolving with Google initiatives, new e-books, and a changing consumer marketplace. And after three years, we just ran out of time. We really wanted to spend more time on technological issues; but since technology is changing so rapidly, anything relevant in 2006 will probably become old hat in 2007. So maybe it was time to close the book, or perhaps leave the book open for a few new chapters in the coming months.

So is publishing really a cultural endeavor or a commercial enterprise? In reality, it is, has been, and is likely to remain both, a double helix filled not with strands of DNA but with great books, great ideas, and an outpouring of titles that engulf the channels of distribution. It is, unquestionably, the best, the most interesting, and the most influential force in the entire media and entertainment industry (after all, books do educate, inform, and entertain readers). Books contain ideas that endure, prod people to discover new ways of thinking, and at times, put forward ideas that topple totalitarian regimes and allow people to escape from poverty.

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