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The Author in the Digital Age

Cécile Méadel and Nathalie Sonnac*

1

Although books have already been undergoing dematerialization for some time,[1] the impact of this digitization has remained limited, at least until very recently, because the sector was better protected by the law than music or cinema, and because the large number of publishers makes it more diverse, less concentrated, and less financialized. It is also undoubtedly less threatened: it "costs" an amateur more (in time, at least) to digitally publish a book than a piece of music, and there is an infinite diversity of books available. However, digitization greatly changes all stages of the book creation process, from manufacture to production, distribution, publicity, and even storage.

2

With the technological revolution, digitization has affected all types of content, and new tools for reading have emerged (digital tablets, iPads, Kindles, e-books, and so forth). This has been accompanied by sociological change, with ever-wider access to high-speed Internet, the rapid spread of new communication tools, and a renewed use of the written word (never have we read and written as many as since we began doing so on-screen). Finally, economic change has allowed new players to enter the production chain (the so-called disintermediation and reintermediation of the book sector). It has also created new and varied business models, which take into account the particularities of the Internet economy, particularly phenomena of concentration due to networks, the fragmentation of audiences, and the consumer demand for free access in all creative sectors (music, text, video, images, and so forth).

3

It is interesting to examine the effect of these changes on authors. How does one write, publish, and become known in a universe that has been so profoundly altered by the digital age? Surprisingly, the author is absent from many studies on books:[2] aside from Bernard Lahire's important work on *The Literary Condition* [*La Condition*

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[1] The digitization of large collections began in the early 1990s. Its main objectives at the time were heritage related, for example in France with the launch of Gallica (The French National Library's online collection).

[2] Excluding the rich works in literary and philosophical theory on the subject of the author (to give just two examples of founding theorists, Foucault and Barthes), which address other issues.

littéraire](examined below), [3] there are almost no studies focusing on the author. Many works focus on the book market, [4] e-books, [5] representations and images of authors,[6] the history of publishing,[7] and the reader.[8] However, none (or very few) examine those who publish books, the conditions in which they work, and their relationship with writing, publication, and distribution. Similarly, there are no attempts to measure or quantify their activities. To our knowledge, there has been no statistical survey concerning this group as a whole. Nor are there any studies on their encounter with the digitization of knowledge and content, with changes in publishing, or with the huge surge of online written texts. Yet how can we understand the circulation, the development, or the ecosystem of books (the mission given to the Hadopi labs, and the mission to which this work contributes)[9] if we know nothing about the key players? We put these questions to twenty-five male and female authors, in Paris and the provinces, as well as in the United States and Great Britain. Our investigation yielded several lines of reflection that will be pursued in the following sections.

Considering Authors in their Diversity

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To understand the ecology of books today, it is necessary to consider the author in their full sense, as a producer of works. Paradoxically, when the term "author" is taken in its general sense, without limiting its applications to the literary or academic model, it becomes apparent that there are many ways of being an author (that is, of publishing all kinds of books, in all genres). We will assume that all authors, whether they write comic strips or detective novels, fiction or practical books, are "creators." In the publishing world it is widely known that the books that sell best are often generally ignored by studies on the subject: manga, nutrition guides, gift books, learning aids, journalistic studies, and so forth. All are affected by the fate of that very particular object: the book. However, of the few existing works on the subject (such as that of

[3] Bernard Lahire, *La Condition littéraire* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006).
[4] Françoise Benhamou and Olivia Guillon, *Modèles économiques d'un marché naissant: le livre numérique* (Paris: Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, DEPS, 2010); Christian Robin, *Les Livres dans l'univers numérique* (Paris: La Documentation française, 2011).
[5] Among the large number of works, it is worth citing Marin Dacos and Pierre Mounier, *Le Livre électronique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010) and Hal Varian, ed., *Internet Publishing and Beyond: The Economics of Digital Information and Intellectual Property* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).
[6] Nathalie Heinich, *Être écrivain, création et identité* (Paris: La Découverte, 2000).
[7] Roger Chartier, *L'Ordre des livres. Lecteurs, auteurs, bibliothèques en Europe entre XIV^e^ et XVIII^e^ siècle* (Aix-en-Provence: Alinea, 1992); Robert Darnton, *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009).
[8] See the many studies by the French National Centre for Publishing (CNL, or Centre national du livre), by the département études et prospectives (Department of Studies and Forecasting) of the French Ministry of Culture, by the Motif (the Île-de-France study center on books and writing), and others.
[9] This observation, from a study by the Hadopi Internet Economy and Use Labs, with Audrey Llamas, Francesca Musiani, Marianne Serfaty, Mathilde Persuy, Mathieu Perona, Vincent Petitet, Virginie Sonet, and Guillaume Sire, directed by Cécile Méadel and Nathalie Sonnac, provided the basis for the work *L'Auteur au temps du numérique* (Paris: Éditions des archives contemporaines, 2012).

Bernard Lahire), most concentrate on the symbolic and "noble" novelist, seen as the only true "writer-creator." If we wish to understand how knowledge and content is produced today in book form, from an authorial point of view, and if we wish to understand the sector and its stakeholders, we must look beyond these canonical figures. It is also necessary to study writers of practical works, comics, romantic or erotic novels, academic books, and children's books, in order to take into account the rich diversity of publication models and authorial conditions. These writers will not have the same cognitive orientation, resources, or ideas about their authorial work, or relationships to the "milieu," precisely because they do not belong to the same milieu or the same environment. They are affected differently by digitization, with different degrees of complementarity and competition. Authors of encyclopedias are more affected than playwrights, but they form a part of the future of books.

The Digital Sector: A New Form of Publishing

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It is important to avoid repeating past mistakes, which consisted in analyzing the different subsectors together, without taking into account their particularities, and in considering the influence of the digital age as just a technological advance to be transposed onto this new context. Digitization reconfigures sectors. Because parts of the publishing market are more economically robust than others, the Lang Law in France proposed the imposition of a standard price for books (set by the publisher), so that certain distributors, particularly large generalist or specialist stores, would not restrict their range to quick-selling books (best sellers, with large print runs) at low prices (with profits relying on high sales). Such a pattern would *de facto* have restricted bookshop sales of more complex, slower-selling books (less widely read, with small print runs), thus making them unprofitable to publish. This form of partial protection from market dynamics via the establishment of fixed prices for books[10] wherever they are sold (be it in supermarkets or bookshops), allowed booksellers to broaden their range.

6

The same confusions seen in analyses of the written press arise in current analyses of the publishing sector. We often speak of a crisis of the written press, when this crisis actually only affects the daily press (in France, twelve publications out of over 4,500). This causes multiple confusions, particularly concerning possible similarities between economic models. In fact, the analyses are inaccurate: before the digital age, the daily press had somewhat distinct stakeholders, strategies, and regulatory methods for the mass, professional, and specialist magazine divisions. Like the press, publishing cannot be studied as a single sector;

[10] See Mathieu Perona, "Trois essais sur les politiques publiques des industries culturelles" (doctoral thesis, EHESS, 2010), in particular chapter 2; Mathieu Perona and Jérôme Pouvet, *Le Prix unique du livre à l'heure du numérique* (Paris: Éditions Rue d'Ulm, 2010).

it cannot be analyzed as if it were uniform. The number of authors, publishers, publishing strategies, and even economic successes differs widely between parts of the sector. The competitive worlds differ, particularly because demands differ. This reflection also applies to studying readerships. The key element in the crisis of France's daily press was (and continues to be) the weakness of its readership. The French read few daily newspapers—far less than citizens of other European countries. However, they are the top consumers of the magazine press. This makes markets incomparable. The same applies to reading itself. Although 94% of French people own books, only slightly over half of them (57%) have bought a book in the last twelve months,[11] and only 16% of these recent buyers buy more than twelve books a year. In other words, the proportion of "big" readers is relatively low, and is decreasing. Moreover, these average figures hide great disparities between sexes and generations. Thus, the digital publishing sector should be seen not as a systematic transition from the traditional sector, but as a new sector in itself, particularly because reader demand in the digital age has changed.

A Wider Definition of the Book

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Although we do not wish to define an innovation in terms of old models, or to view the digital book as derived from the paper book in the same way as the railway was defined in terms of the stagecoach,[12] the book should not be seen as a fixed and possibly archaic entity based on contracts and author copyright, economic sectors, sociotechnical configurations, and the organization of the sector with its intermediaries. We are confident that the book in its current form will continue to exist, but that it will also (as it is already beginning to do) give rise to different media, text formats, and reading formats.

8

In digital form, the book can be transformed. It does not necessarily exist in a fixed state, because it can, for example, be constantly reworked by its author, enriched by new content (such as sound, image, or games), and added to or questioned by readers. It seems obvious that paper books will also change with the transition to digital. Authors are conceiving new forms, dreaming up not only of new ways of illustrating and enriching their writing, but also multiple manifestations of texts and their pedagogical formulations, or even of ways of escaping the linearity of the story. Some are experimenting with writing texts in installments. These works still claim to be books, but they escape the page, and take inspiration from the narration methods used in video games and social networks.

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[11] Olivier Donnat, *Les Pratiques culturelles des Français à l'ère numérique. Enquête 2008* (Paris: Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, DEPS/La Découverte, 2009).
[12] See Jacques Perriault, *La Communication du savoir à distance* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000).

Not all authors are interested in this enriched kind of book, and not all of them will be forced to adopt it. However, it is possible to envisage the emergence of a new type of author, with new skills, know-how, and writing techniques, a specific expressive format, a modified relationship with the reader, and new intermediaries: a creator of enriched digital texts, who only remotely resembles what we today call an author.

Authorial Activity beyond the Confines of the Book

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As we know, very few authors earn large amounts from their writing.[13] Authors have always relied on other personal or professional sources of income. Their rewards are mainly symbolic and social, rather than financial. However, today they can earn more and more additional income through activities linked to their writing. This may be through meetings, lectures, debates, residences, workshops, and various presentations. Books are becoming elements in a continuum, and not necessarily the sole objective or product of authorial activity. Other forms of expression and promotion exist and are developing. For example, authors of children's literature have at their disposal an economy based on bringing the story to life, and on education, with (in France) a collective organization that is rare the authorial world: The Charter of Children's Authors and Illustrators.[14] Similarly, authors can create a platform, by maintaining a blog or website for their book, or even regularly enriching their work and maintaining privileged relationships with their readers or fans. These activities bring them recognition, and can also lead to income, conferences, expertise, articles, or creations. Digitization offers new *externalities*, which must be taken into account if we wish to understand the author, the way they work, and their ecosystem.

Authorial Use of New Distribution Methods

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Often, authors experience dissatisfaction, or even frustration concerning the distribution that publishers offer for their work, feeling that the publisher has not done all they can to promote it, or that their book has received insufficient attention. Publishers are well aware of this dissatisfaction, which often makes relationships with authors difficult. However, it could be considered that the distribution of a published book is inherently incomplete and limited. Often, the publisher only commits if they see positive signs, because they know that they cannot promote all of the works that they put on the market. By having a blog presence,

[13] According to Benoît Yvert: "2,500 authors live off their rights. The number of creative professionals in France can be considered to be between fifty and one hundred thousand, plus two million self-proclaimed 'authors.'" Source: "L'Avenir du livre," *Le Débat* (2007): 12. Bernard Lahire and Françoise Benhamou make the same observation.

[14] Charte des auteurs et illustrateurs jeunesse: http://www.la-charte.fr/

maintaining their site, and by contributing themselves to the buzz surrounding their work, authors reclaim some power and regain some recognition. In the past, they did this at a local level, through book signings in bookshops, public lectures, and personal connections with journalists (methods which, of course, are still used today). This does not mean that authors are taking control of distribution, or that they are cutting out the middlemen, but simply that the distribution of roles can be altered. Intermediaries can change. Their work evolves and will continue to do so.

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Thus, it is evident that digitization allows authors to address their readership more directly. This may be at a health forum where they converse with potential readers, either directly or via social networks, on a blog by a group of amateurs who allow them to contribute, or on their own website if they manage to attract enough correspondents. These exchanges can create a market buzz and win the interest of their publisher, mobilizing them and inciting them to put more effort and resources into promoting the work. This, it should be noted, is no more a guarantee of success than the author's own efforts or the publisher's normal work.

Private Publishing and Self-Publishing

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It is necessary to distinguish between these two publication methods. In both cases, there are still intermediaries, but the risk is distributed differently and the financial flows are not the same. In private publishing, the author finances the publication of his or her work, and is entirely responsible for its diffusion and distribution, whereas in self-publishing (on websites such as lulu.com), the author puts time and not money into producing his or her work. These new forms of publishing can inspire fear among publishers, particularly in the case of well-known authors (who can choose to deal directly with large online distribution platforms like Amazon), or in the case of authors' associations (which can decide to share costs and promote their respective works). One notable example is Numilog, a platform created in 2000 and bought by Hachette in 2008, which offers a self-publishing service. Another example is Smashwords, a platform dedicated to self-publishing and independent publishers.

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Although digitization has not fundamentally changed the author-publisher relationship, it opens up new possibilities. This relationship between two parties is part of a long process, where the publisher plays an ambivalent or double role. On the one hand, they *edit* the work, establishing a relationship of trust, proofreading, and encouragement, and even an affectionate relationship, with the author. This relationship relates to the content of the work. On the other hand, they *publish* the work. This is the "commercial" side of their role, which links them both to the author (principally via copyright) and to other stakeholders further

down the value chain (disseminators, distributors, booksellers, and press officers). Digitization puts in question, or at least disrupts, the publisher's second role. It should also be remembered that the author-publisher relationship itself lies within a particular context, linked to the current era. Three elements are of interest here. Firstly, the number of manuscripts sent to publishers is constantly increasing[15] (Jérôme Lindon emphasizes that publishing is the only sector where decreased demand is met by an increased supply). Secondly, publishing has become highly industrialized. Thirdly, prescribing media, competitions, book fairs, and all kinds of prizes have flourished in recent years. These factors have left their mark on author-publisher relationships. Today, digitization seems to make the author more autonomous, and less dependent. Although authors still see the "guardian" role of publishers as primordial, digitization allows them to break away.

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In France's digital publishing sector, new intermediaries are appearing, particularly literary agents, who have entered into the author-publisher relationship (whereas they remain an exception in traditional French publishing). Not having mastered this digital environment, authors sometimes prefer to call on the services of a literary agent, who is better able to negotiate their rights with publishers, but also with sales platforms such as Amazon. Moreover, such agents can found their own publishing houses, thus entirely assuming the publishing role.[16]

The Reader: An Author among Others?

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It is easier for today's readers to write texts about (or even based on) what they read. What was once common practice among academics has become commonplace with the rise of nonprofessional reader/writers.[17] Much has been said about the growing importance of amateur practices in the music industry,[18] but less attention has been paid to such practices in writing, which are becoming more widespread and diversified with digitization. It is even possible to speak of a "writing frenzy."[19]

[15] In his study on pocket books, Éric Marti emphasizes the general trend in book production: "The number of titles published is increasing much faster than the number of copies produced and, above all, than the number sold." *Les Enjeux du livre au format de poche* (Paris: Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, DEPS, 2008).

[16] One example is American literary agent Andrew Wylie, whose portfolio of successful authors includes Philip Roth, Salman Rushdie, Orhan Pamuk, and others. He set up his own publishing company, Odyssey Editions, taking the digital rights for these authors from the publisher Random House. See Idate, *E-book, le marché du livre numérique 2008–2014* (Montpellier: Idate, 2010).

[17] Terje Hillesund, "Digital Reading Spaces: How Expert Readers Handle Books, the Web and Electronic Paper," *First Monday* 15, no. 4 (2010), http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2762/2504 (last accessed August, 1, 2013)

[18] Antoine Hennion, Les amateurs de musique. Sociologie d'une pratique et d'un goût," *Sociologie de l'Art* 12 (1999): 9–39.

[19] Just as literary historians speak of the "reading frenzy" seen in the second half of the eighteenth century.

According to Jean-Louis Missika,[20] the technological revolution reveals a behavioral revolution. Citizens are becoming involved in society in new ways, and interactivity lies at the heart of this involvement. Chat rooms, blogs, forums, social networks: there are numerous possibilities for communication between readers and authors. There is also growing continuity between reading and writing practices. An analysis of the close relationship between the author and certain readers online, via blogs or websites, reveals situations similar to those in which producers allow fans of television series to pick an ending or to choose between several scenarios. A margin of writing in which the overlap of parties puts the notion of the author in question is also developing. This makes it difficult to establish clear intellectual ownership, and thus exclusive remuneration. However, although (with or without the Internet) the reader remains the ultimate horizon for authors (or for the vast majority of them), this does not mean that all authors exploit the many possible means of contact with their readers in their production. Is it therefore possible that amateurs, transformed by digitization, are renewing writing practices? That they are stripping their noble medium, the book, of its majesty, but benefitting from the increase that on-screen writing offers in closeness, interactivity, flexibility, and even the taste for reading?

A New and Confusing Market

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Authors face a new market, whose complexity is as unfamiliar to them as it is to other players. For authors, the diverse file formats, the multiple platforms and reading media, the various readerships, and the heterogeneous technical specifications and their incompatibility throw doubt on the centuries-old characteristics of the book—the existence of a lasting, transportable medium, and a readable, distributable product. Moreover, production costs are even more opaque for digital than for paper books. Authors feel that payment and profit sharing with the publisher are less fair than for paper books, and consider that the disappearance of the latter should lead to increased rights for authors.[21] Publishers argue against this, but have yet to provide reasons that convince authors. In these times of changing material formats and economic organization in the book industry, it is important to have a clear awareness of how publishing works, and more particularly of how authors work, in all their difference and diversity. If publishers want to remain indispensable intermediaries in the book market, they will need to explain, promote, and assume their new roles.

The Author: The New Face of Amateur Creation

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[20] Jean-Louis Missika, *La Fin de la télévision* (Paris: Le Seuil/La République des idées, 2006).
[21] According to the study by MOTif, *EbookZ, L'offre légale et illégale de livres numériques* (Paris: MOTif, 2010), e-books cost 18% less than paper versions.

It has been said that writing books is almost always a nonprofessional activity, but the particularity of the Internet is that it provides a communication method that allows nonprofessionals to find an audience without using intermediaries.[22] User-generated content is particularly present in seven areas: music, video, information, photography, games and online communities, encyclopedias, and software. It also undoubtedly has a growing presence in the world of books. New platforms are emerging, some of which are dedicated to publishing amateur novels. For example,[23] in 2006, Mika, a young Japanese author, wrote(*Koizora*)*Love Sky: A Sad Love Story*) on her cell phone. At first freely accessible on the blogging platform for amateur authors, *Maho no iLand*, the text was later published on paper, when the author found a publisher online. In a small publishing miracle, the paper version was read by around 2.6 million people in two years, and by almost twenty million readers in total for all formats. Ease of access, social networks, and growing numbers of blogs and personal websites increase and encourage possibilities for communication between individuals, and create a great deal of space for all means of expression, be they image based or text based. Writing is becoming continuous, collective, and adaptive. Publishing is no longer the final stage in the distribution of content that largely predates it.

Piracy: An Ambiguous Issue

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It seems that books are only mildly affected by piracy; the available catalogue is still less rich and less accessible than for music and film. However, the supply is slowly increasing and diversifying.[24] Authors' attitudes towards piracy are often ambivalent. On the one hand, they find satisfaction in being more widely read and in interesting an increased audience ("If people pirate my texts, it is because they like what I write.") They are pleased to be saving culture from a commercial market. On the other hand, among most authors, there is a still-limited concern about income (the majority of authors do not rely on their authorial rights), which is generally low. This is accompanied by fears about books becoming devalued, about losing control, and about the industry drying up. This ambivalence echoes the attitude of authors towards their publishers: when profits are not clearly and transparently shared, and when authors are dissatisfied with them, they see free access as an advanced form of unequal exchange: in any case, for almost all of them, the financial rewards can never measure up to the massive undertaking of writing a book, so the satisfaction they draw from having an increased readership, exchanging with Internet users, and conversing with other authors, seems to be highly valuable. However, when these phenomena threaten publishers, and above all booksellers, we return to

[22] Alain Le Diberder, "*User generated contents*: retour aux sources ou révolution?" in *Culture Web*, eds. Xavier Greffe and Nathalie Sonnac (Paris: Dalloz, 2008), 49–59.
[23] Idate, *E-book*, 20.
[24] MOTIif, *EbookZ* 2 (Paris: MOTif, 2011).

the idea that “all work should be paid,” that a new economy of books cannot be based entirely on free access, and that it is necessary to find new ways of setting prices for books—all books, be they paper or electronic.

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Digitization now affects the work of the vast majority of authors, in the form of electronic texts, email exchanges, Google searches, file transfers, and so forth. Already, some authors speak of a real “dialogue of media:” screen, paper, printed test pages, website windows, an so on. The new manifestations of texts transform the order of discourses and the distribution of texts, as well as their uses and their reading.[25] The digital and paper forms of a single text are not identical. Authors are not the only ones to be affected by the evolution of texts. Readers are also concerned, not only when faced with digital writing, but also with print. Both authors and readers have experienced discontinuous reading, deconstructed hierarchies, and multiple ways of consulting and distributing texts (hyperlinks, search functions, annotation or transformation of texts, and so forth). Both have had to cope with changes in perception, in management, and in cognitive categories (with the accumulation of immediately available online knowledge and content). If a revolution in reading is taking place, it will lead the author, like the reader, to transform their creative economy. There is therefore an urgent need to understand it fully.

Abstract

The vocations of the publisher and bookseller have been hit hard by the digital wave. But how about authors? Are they professionals or amateurs? Do they draw their principal revenues from books or from the other activities linked to them? Do they want above all to preserve their rights, or for their works to be read?

[25] Roger Chartier, “Du codex à l’écran: les trajectoires de l’écrit,” *Solaris* 1 (1994), http://gabriel.gallezot.free.fr/Solaris/d01/1chartier.html (last accessed August, 1, 2013).