



Pascal Fouché, Olivier Mongin, Marc–Olivier Padis

Will the book enter the digital age?

An interview with Pascal Fouché

The digitisation of the book has brought a new balance of power in the trade, with established publishers locked in struggle with the new digital distributors for control of production. Pascal Fouché, author of an encyclopaedia of the book, discusses whether publishers are prepared for the challenge posed by the dematerialisation of the printed word.

The world of publishing has but a poor understanding of its own history or its own economics.¹ Despite the book's durability and the longevity of the main French publishing houses (which are doing more and more work on their own archives), the industry has difficulty in forming an overview of its situation, its strengths and its weaknesses. That is why the large-scale project for the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique du livre* (Encyclopaedic Dictionary of the Book), which will shortly be publishing its third volume, has been a crucially important effort of understanding and reflection. This dictionary is certainly encyclopaedic both in its aim of speaking of the world of the book as a whole, and in the work that has gone into the entries, which are truly analytical and sometimes amount to mini-essays.

Where the history of publishing will often be satisfied with confronting atypical personalities with changing but always compelling economic realities, this extensive collective work follows the entire history of the book and all the links in the process of publication. Thus it sets forth not only the terminology of printing, the technology of book manufacture, the towns that played a part in the book's historical development and the material conditions of writing, but also an account of booksellers, libraries, publishing houses or even collections that have had an important impact on readers. This indispensable tool reminds us that the book itself — that everyday, even banal object — has a history that is long, varied, and complex to an extent that is often not fully appreciated.

Esprit

Esprit: Today books are experiencing a major and multidimensional upheaval. For one thing, there is now the possibility of disembodied books, separating them from their paper form, indeed abandoning the whole idea of a single form. Once it is in the form of a digital file, a book may be transferred from one device to another or from one reader to another and with ever fewer technical or economic constraints. In what ways does this technological "disembodiment" amount to a major change in the history of publishing?

Pascal Fouché: It's too soon to say. We're still only taking the first halting steps in this process of disembodiment, even though it's about twelve years ago now that we first began to speak of digital books. At that stage people were a

little hasty in proclaiming the death of the book and a total transformation of the publishing industry. The truth is that, right from the start, we've been guilty of a misnomer when we used the term "electronic book" to mean both the medium and the content. The medium is the digital device, which is controllable and portable, which could take the place of the paper volume, and which people now refer to as a reader, "a digital reader", "reading tablet", or, in French, a *liseuse*. The content is the text itself, and this may have originated as a former book that has now been digitised or may be presented as a new book that was conceived solely in a digital version. But, if this is the case, is it still a book at all?

This double meaning relates, in fact, to the complex nature of the history of the book, which, if we wish to go beyond what everyday use of the term tends to suggest, is difficult to pin down. Throughout history there have been very diverse attempts to arrive at a definition of the book, and it is only since the beginning of the 1970s that the tax authorities have provided us with a stable definition, one which the whole of the profession regards as a guide: a book is a printed medium intended to diffuse an idea. This taxman's definition is used, in particular, for the purposes of applying the reduced rate of VAT of 5.5 per cent.² It lays down what is to be considered as a book and what is not. So, for example, an advertising brochure of fewer than 48 pages is not a book, a directory is not a book, and so on. In terms of this definition, then, it is the fact of being printed that makes it a book. This is why, at present, digital files sold on the Internet as "electronic books" do not enjoy the same reduced rate of tax as books. The current debate about VAT on digital books derives from this feature, that is, for a physical book that has been reissued as a facsimile in a digital medium, there should be no good reason not to apply the same rate as would apply to the physical book itself. When it is a book created on the Internet, however, a book that is constantly adaptable, that is full of hypertext links that contains video or audio material, are we really still talking about a book? Should we be looking for a better definition of the digital book? In any case, we are only at the initial stages. And I have not even mentioned the different approaches to reading that result from it. As far as I'm concerned, an author's text, whether fictional or reflective, whether on paper or digital, is still a book.

Esprit: Isn't it the case that the really fundamental change lies in the mobility of the text? We are moving from a physical medium, therefore one that is bound to a specific location, to a digital medium that provides a host of devices on which the text can be read: reading tablet, phone, computer screen and so on.

PF: Yes, but on devices such as those you are not necessarily reading the same book. First, because you have to adapt it to the platform. It has been noted that, at the outset, reading tablets attempted to reproduce the page of the physical book as it stood. But, just like the change from manuscripts to printing, that did not last. The first printed books looked exactly like manuscripts and that continued to be the case for a long time. What is fascinating about digital texts is that changes are happening much more rapidly. Is this process of innovation going to stabilise or are we embarking on a period where systems are perpetually changing? New technologies are constantly being added to earlier ones, new ways of working emerge, using new devices, and the text has to be adapted to these. Today one format appears to be becoming dominant (*ePub*) because it can be read on the greatest number of devices, but there are also proprietary formats, in particular, the one owned by Amazon.

Behind all these questions about how the text is displayed there are all the things that can be done with the text, all those things that the digital format allows you to do that the book did not, such as commentaries, references, links and so on. The way that we approach reading has been transformed just as much by the fact that it is no longer as linear as was the case with the printed text. Thus reading evolves into an ensemble of parallel readings that may be interrupted by a link, by annotations, by additional information provided by other contributors. The way that we read is undergoing a metamorphosis. Generations of big readers such as ours are used to reading in the traditional way. Curiously enough, though, it is the biggest readers that are taking most readily to these new approaches to reading. Recent research has shown that, in the US, it is those who are already the biggest readers that buy the most electronic books. They are not replacing physical books with electronic ones because, after all, they have a large number of physical books available to them, whereas there are still only a few digital books; they have taken to digital books as a new way of reading that is additional to the physical book.

But is this going to continue? It is thought nowadays that digital books will not replace physical books. Paper books will continue to exist, at least as far as a proportion of production is concerned, although already some of the total has been disembodied or soon will be. So, for example, hardly any paper encyclopaedias are being produced, and the whole range of cookery books, travel and DIY guides, and even university textbooks, especially in law or medicine, are more and more often being produced directly as digital versions. Anything that needs to have regular updates and is linked to documentary databases is perfectly suited to the digital form. Particularly anything that falls into the category of useful guides, the kind of thing that often used to be sold by subscription.

Esprit: Now that it is possible to revise the text and for several people to play a part in composing it or to include sound or visual material, digital books now have a more open character, as opposed to the more closed nature of the printed work and to the whole idea of the work as a finished product. Is this linked to the relatively recent taste for unfinished forms (correspondence, drafts, etc.)?

PF: The problem is precisely that there is almost no trace of those writing and creative processes that are of interest not only to the reader and the critic but to the historian too. The fact that authors write directly onto their computer and correct their version without retaining any earlier version means that nowadays we no longer have the manuscript stages that we once had. We are dealing with a work in progress but we can no longer identify the stages of that progress. Anyone interpreting the work will have to do their textual analysis on the basis of a definitive manuscript, unless the author happens to be an obsessive and has kept all the successive versions (which does happen). The disappearance of manuscripts and correspondence between authors and publishers is made worse by the decline of the printed version. Writing and then correcting successive versions made the writer's mind follow different pathways. The fact that we can no longer retrace the history of such developments may open up new fields of research, ones that we find it difficult to conceive of today.

The bond between the publisher and the writer, and between the writer and the reader, have been radically altered. It may turn out to be interesting to examine them from that point of view. The role of a publisher is no longer simply to take a manuscript, print it and distribute it; it also means organising the distribution and promotion of the text in a totally different way from what used

to be done for a paper publication. This is obvious from the proliferation of publishers' sites that are devoted to a single writer and that include interviews and videos, or from the fact that some publishers are beginning to produce scientific texts in hard copy but place the accompanying notes on a website. This is a new way of using the media available to us. It means that reading is also undergoing evolution. It may, however, be a matter for concern that such aids to promotion, because they are expensive, may be reserved for authors with big sales who may not even be the ones that need them most. Publishers will not necessarily go to the same lengths for a more "difficult" writer.

However, there are other initiatives that have less to do with conventional forms of communication. I'm thinking in particular of writers' blogs such as the one by François Bon, which falls somewhere between a blog and a writing workshop. It makes contact possible between the reader and the writer. Admittedly, some of the contributions are of more interest than others, but at least he can have a real discussion with his readership. What he used to do at a signing session in a bookshop in front of fifty or so readers he can now do on the Internet for a much wider audience. Authors are now probably more involved than ever in their relationship with the reader.

Esprit: Ten years ago we used to think that disembodiment would be an "Oulipian dream",³ lending itself to all kinds of experiments in form, multi-authored games with texts and so on. But, in the end, won't it be bestsellers and the publishing houses that are already huge that will get the most benefit from digital publishing, just because of the overwhelming power of their communication systems?

PF: Yes, there were some writers who thought that the Internet would obviate the need for publishers and that everybody would be able to publish their texts by themselves, and that would increase their readership. That is a complete fiction, but one that you still hear to this day. All sorts of people think that all they have to do to be read is to make their text available.

This ignores the skill of the publisher, which is to choose, prioritise and to find a readership for a text. Authors who publish themselves have the same set of problems. They don't get promoted. It's even worse on the Internet. They are even more drowned in a flood of texts and there is no chance that they will get spotted. There has been an explosion in the number of people who want to write. But you are quite right: it is basically the bestsellers that get promoted by publishing houses. Those who write for a more restricted readership will have to make a place for themselves, but what sort of place will that be?

The balance of power in the book trade

Esprit: But a book isn't just a text, whether printed or otherwise, it's also a chain made up of various players. At present it too has been completely turned upside down. What place is there still for bookshops and for libraries?

PF: It's true that the most important question is what will happen to the publishing process that links the writer to the reader. As I've already said, the paper book is not going to disappear overnight. Part of that chain will automatically be preserved in order to meet the need to distribute paper books. So, more than ever, we need bookshops to sell and libraries to lend. It would be tempting to tell ourselves that if everything were digital, we would no longer need intermediaries. Why would we need to go to a bookshop to buy an electronic book and why would we go to the library to consult electronic

books? Since we are still at a stage where we don't quite know how things are going to develop, publishers are, quite obviously, motivated to defend booksellers so that they can continue to sell their paper production. Even though, they think — but hesitate to say — that, in the long term, they might be able to do without them. As far as paper books are concerned, libraries and librarians, whose task is now evolving so that they are closer to becoming information officers or archivists, continue to be needed, particularly in their role as guardians of our heritage and specialists in communications.

And let us not forget another link in the chain: the printer. You might think that with digital books we will not need printers any more. We are heading back *de facto* to the situation obtained in the nineteenth century, when booksellers were simultaneously publishers, printers and sellers. In the original meaning of the term, a *libraire* — a bookseller — was the one who carried out all the stages of book-production up to and including sales. When the industrial revolution came along, such bookshops in some cases became the large and well-known publishing houses of today: *Hachette* used to be referred to as the *Librairie Hachette*, and even from its earliest days, Gallimard presented itself as a seller of publications. In the digital era, however, it will no longer be the bookseller that brings all the production activities together, but the publisher, who could replace the previous stage, the printer, and the subsequent stage, the bookseller, as well.

Esprit: The term "editor" has taken on an even more specific meaning with directors of series who were editors in the sense that they had an intellectual project to fulfil, they looked after authors, they commissioned books, they created an area of intellectual activity. The problem is that their role has been reduced in publishing houses, where managers and financial analysts now rule the roost.

PF: The book industry cannot dispense with editors, by which we mean those who select, identify and promote works. Today, when publishing houses feel that their position is threatened, their immediate response is to deal with the problem in economic terms. It should be said that this was a movement that began in the 1960s, when publishing houses first began to be consolidated, a move that brought in its train the arrival of managers and the gradual disappearance from the companies of the traditional role of the editor, who acted as a counterweight and a support for the author. So this shift is not something new. But it seems to me that we have reached a point where it is coming to a dead end. Because, if you think about it, digital publishing will bring the craft of the editor back to life. Either in existing publishing houses or in new, digital publishing companies. There has always been a multitude of small publishing firms that have acted as talent scouts for writers that the large companies have sometimes later taken up. With established publishers focusing on the biggest sellers, the field is left open for smaller companies who will have to create their own space in the field of digital publishing.

Esprit: These upheavals help to interfere with the position in the chain of some of its players: some are being weakened by it, others strengthened. Rather than making it possible for an increase in the number of new entrants, are the changes not just strengthening those that are already most firmly established? The big publishers have power on their side; they are able to digitise more content more quickly, and so on. Moreover, we should note the arrival of new players (Google, Apple, etc.) capable of mobilising gigantic financial resources in a sector where turnover is still quite modest.

PF: This is indeed the greatest danger threatening the publishing industry at the present time. Concentration of publishing houses is continuing in the context of digitisation. It has already happened in the field of science and technology. It is not yet the case in other areas because it is limited by the segmentation of the readership.

On the other hand, the entry of new players into publishing is not a totally new phenomenon either. The major French publishing groups were bought, a few years ago now, by groups that had nothing to do with the sector: for example, Matra (later Lagardère) bought out Hachette at the beginning of the 1980s and the Vivendi group was not originally in the publishing field. Nowadays the new players are not buying up publishers, but entering the publishing industry wanting to play a part right at its heart. Amazon and its online bookshop is a new player that no one at the outset expected to develop in the way that it did.

For Google or Apple, books are just a loss-leader, in the first case in order to sell advertising and in the second to sell its own products. Why should Nintendo want to sell books? Simply in order to get into a market and use that market to promote its main business. At the level of such players, publishing is still a minor activity in terms of turnover.

Producing books is still not very expensive; it is promotion and distribution that costs money. These new entrants are supported by structures that the existing players do not have. In the US, Amazon attempted to set a single price of \$9.90 for a digital book before publishers reacted, but the battle is not yet over. The price of digital books ought theoretically to be lower, given that certain links in the chain are removed; it is said today to make a difference of 60 to 70 per cent to the price, but readers still find it too expensive. After all, creating a digital book does not simply consist of converting a file into PDF format. There is still the work of the editor that needs to be paid for, not to mention the author and, above all, the cost of promoting the books.

Seize the moment?

Esprit: How have French publishers dealt with all these problems? Looking at this technological revolution with ten years' hindsight, how do we assess their response to these upheavals?

PF: They paid attention, but they also adopted an extraordinary "wait and see" attitude. They watched developments with great concern, especially when they looked at what happened to records or the cinema. They clung onto their paper books. With hindsight, one can say that they were right to wait and see. But, more than anything else, they lacked a strategic approach.

They are still afraid today but this time it is mainly of being left behind, of not being ready when the market takes off. As long as all that was being produced were reading tablets that were expensive and not very user-friendly, the danger seemed far away. But nowadays, when products are appearing that could be of interest to all readers, publishers are telling themselves that it's time they got moving. They have been getting ready for this for two or three years already. But given that there is not much of a market (very few people are buying files on line), then, for the moment, it is just a matter of investment. So it is obviously the largest companies that are able to be the first to invest. Then there is the added difficulty that we still do not know for sure which will be the right formats, even if they are beginning to stabilise.

It should be pointed out that when the Bibliothèque Nationale (the French National Library) moved sites, it scanned its books in image mode and that now, today, it is having to do it all again in text mode. At the end of the 1980s, when Jacques Attali sold to François Mitterrand the idea of what was called the Very Large Library, what he was dreaming of was an entirely virtual library. At the time, digitisation in image mode seemed to offer the best cost to quality ratio. They went too fast and jumped too soon. Today conversion of text into digital form can be done more cheaply.

Publishers, because they were over-cautious, did not make the same mistake. Now that they think that the market might take off, which is actually what is happening in the US, they are trying to position themselves in this market by obtaining help from public bodies to digitise their holdings. As recent publications have appeared they have been automatically digitising and setting up their sales sites so as to avoid losing their hold on distribution and to maintain their own sales network, because, in France, publishers have, by tradition, also been distributors. Indeed a significant share of the groups' turnover has been provided by distribution. Thus, for example, when Le Seuil was sold it emerged that the largest proportion of its turnover came from distribution. That was why, once that branch had been dropped, Le Seuil found itself in difficulties.

Publishers are trying to reproduce this same model in terms of digital production with their own sales network for digital books. Is that a good idea? They are all lining up in battle formation so that, as soon as the market comes into being, they will have a catalogue that is already well stocked. And once that has happened, what will be its market share by comparison with physical books? A recent government report on digital books put forward two hypotheses, each as peculiar as the other. One was that digital books would have no impact on sales of physical books. The other was that, between now and 2050, digital books would seize 50 per cent of the book market. The second of these hypotheses is based on the fact that, as we said earlier, in the US it is the big readers who buy most electronic books. Speculating as far ahead as 2050 on that basis is strange, to say the least. At the same time, there are Australian academics who are forecasting that, in five years' time, one third of books will be read in digital form. In all these cases we are simply in the realms of conjecture.

Esprit: The balance of power is shifting. In this situation the distributor is in a stronger position. What will be left for the publisher? Can a publisher today still manage to promote and feature a title by putting his name to it? Will this branding effect hold up in the future?

PF: Some years ago the supermarket chain Carrefour tried distributing books under its own brand name: it was a dismal failure. This shows that just having a name is not enough. Since 1945, apart from Éditions de Minuit, Le Seuil, Laffont, Actes sud, P.O.L and a few small publishers, very few brands have emerged. But I think that these will survive and become more visible as diversity increases. Small publishers have always had greater difficulty in standing out from the crowd. They can only make themselves more visible through the choices they make and by producing quality work. Publishers' need for reference points is becoming ever more obvious.

Esprit: Which publishers are in the most precarious position? Those producing specialist academic works? Or the non-specialists?

PF: Well, to begin with, it is certainly true that the position of publishers with regard to paper publishing is precarious, but not inevitably so if you can combine paper and digital production.

It seems to be fashionable to claim that the social sciences are finished, but good books are still being published, perhaps with a smaller readership than used to be the case, and they keep this area of publishing going. Proper publishers can still make it work. The source of the problem lies in the fact that nowadays it is very hard to know who makes up the intellectual community. In the past there were links between the press, journals and publishing that made up a sort of coherent whole. Today it is much more fragmented. Digital publishing is not going to change that, but will students buy more books if they are sold in chapters? One thing is for sure: selling extracts will not be good for coherent reflexion. You do not grasp the thoughts of a writer or the coherence of an idea as clearly by picking around here and there. It does nothing to support any kind of cohesive intellectual community. And the same goes for universities. The Internet favours the dispersal of information and means that students lose any sense of prioritisation. Are they going to continue this thinly-spread approach to reading in their other activities, or will they, at some point need to structure their thinking and their ideas?

Towards a new economic model?

Esprit: For an historian like yourself, is the ability to identify an author with a book, with a work — something that is in danger of disappearing in the world of digital books — a long-established fact, or is the idea of an author actually a recent one?

PF: Recognition for an author and the idea of him being able to benefit from the fruits of his work goes back to the Enlightenment. Things have not changed much since then. Nowadays it is regarded as perfectly normal that an author should receive remuneration for producing his text. But what has happened to music on the Internet and the cult of free downloading frightens publishers a great deal. There ought to be regulation, not necessarily by law. But seeing what happened with music has lots of lessons for us: as fewer records began to be sold, production was reduced. Today, at the same time, new record shops are opening up because big stores and supermarkets have downsized or got rid of their record departments! As far as books are concerned, the situation is still uncertain. Pirating will probably not be on the same scale, because illegal copying of a book is not the same thing as making a pirate copy of an audio file. Apple has been successful in selling music using *iTunes* and intends to use the same system for books. Apple's aim is to enter the market as a distributor of content. The *iPad* is based on this idea. It has to be accepted that there will always be some loss through pirating but it is hoped that it can be minimised.

Esprit: What happened with music was that there were some economically very powerful players in the form of Internet service providers (ISPs), and it was in their interests to make things easier for pirate copying by offering ever faster connections. But what is new is the advent of players who aspire to become distributors of content and who, because they are producers of content, see the market in a completely different light.

PF: When that happens will it disadvantage publishers or will publishers organise themselves in such a way as to ensure that what they produce is distributed by these new players? At the moment, the entire argument, or rather the struggle, concerns attempts by publishers to remain in control of

production and to ensure that these players are no more than channels for such texts. We have already seen how, in the US, they have found it difficult because distributors have been in the ascendant to an enormous extent, especially Amazon, which is overpowering them all.

In France publishers are trying to organise so as to avoid getting into that same situation. That is to say that they are trying to have sufficient control of the publishing process to enable them to impose on distributors their own pricing systems and conditions of sale. The battle is not yet won. Publishers are having to invest in digital content even though they are not selling anything. Reading devices are still not really available to the public at large. That may change with the advent of the *iPad* once Apple has sold enough of them to be able to bring the price down, as happened with the *iPhone*. French publishers are already seeking agreements with Apple because the press and books are potentially two of the *iPad's* primary functions. But we are still only at the beginnings of these reading tablets. I don't have much faith in dedicated reading devices but rather in the kind of multi-function device that offers a library alongside its other functions (video, photos, press, Internet, etc.). You have to be able to do everything from a single terminal. The reading tablets that were originally launched were specifically intended for books, and that is one of the reasons why they did not take off.

Esprit: Does that mean that the press and books see their fate as being linked? The Internet has probably had a more destabilising effect on the press than on publishing. Do you see them as having a future in common?

PF: There was a time when part of the press was the work of book publishers. Nowadays the press and books no longer have much in common and their unions are not the same; the *Syndicat du livre* is actually a press union. Indeed, the major groups came to be constituted by buying up both press and publishing. For a long time now these groups have had a belief in a synergy between the two sectors. But in the end, they have never succeeded in really developing it. There is no real homogeneity between journalists and authors, even though some journalists write books and some authors write articles. There are no similarities in the distribution systems either. This Lagardère "model", or Vivendi in Messier's time, that involved convergence between media and publishing, has had its day. But within these groups, questions are being asked, especially when they look at the readership for online journalism. Surprisingly enough, books are holding their own pretty well. Today, a group such as Lagardère is realising that the publishing sector can still be profitable. It has continued to develop and to make money even in a year of crisis! However, it still has to make the right decisions when it comes to the twists and turns of digital publishing. The communications group myth is one more model that politicians uphold with the aim of combating the bogeyman of domination by American groups. It is true that this was indeed how groups in the English-speaking world came to be constituted last century, but the major American groups have been broken up and one of the particular consequences of that development has been that the big American publishers have been bought up by Europeans such as Hachette or Bertelsmann.

Esprit: Reforms in universities are leading to a re-evaluation of research in article form. This means that books have been totally devalued. Only a few years ago, publishing a book was a major development in a researcher's career. What is the position today?

PF: Such a devaluation of books is contributing to a decline in social sciences. Researchers are under pressure to publish articles and consequently do not have time to publish books. The traditional bridge within a publishing house between the editor's review, which acted as a trial, and publication in book form, has practically disappeared. I cannot really see how that could be restored. It is the result of the requirement to be assessed and choosing to publish your work in prestige journals. This makes the former intellectual collaboration between journals and publishing much more fragile. Similarly, the press was involved in such areas. Those areas where writers in the press, in learned journals and publishing were able to exchange ideas no longer exist and this must be a cause for regret.

¹ See "Malaise dans l'édition" [Malaise in publishing], *Esprit*, June 2003. See also Pierre Gastineau, "Face au numérique, panorama du monde du livre en son Salon" [Facing up to digital publishing, a panorama of the world of books at the Salon du Livre], *vid. inf.*, 189–192.

² In France, VAT applies to books, but at the reduced rate of 5.5 per cent — trans.

³ The OuLiPo group (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle) of the 1960s was formed by Raymond Queneau and others and later included Georges Perec and Italo Calvino. It was interested in the principle of potential and ludic writing: writing that emerges from creativity within self-imposed boundaries, e.g. Perec's novel, *La Disparition*, that contains no letter "e" — trans.

Published 2010–07–29

Original in French

Translation by Mike Routledge

Contribution by Esprit

First published in *Esprit* 5/2010 (French version); Eurozine (English version)

© Esprit

© Eurozine