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# Decision-making, market logic and the rating mindset: Negotiating BookScan in the field of US trade publishing

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**Abstract**

How do cultural intermediaries mediate the introduction of new technologies which may challenge the legitimacy of their daily decision-making practices? Using the case of acquisition editors in the US trade publishing industry and the release of BookScan, the first point-of-sale data service for US book publishers, this work highlights the adoption of market-driven data into practices which traditionally have relied on editors' dispositions, intuitions and aesthetic sensibilities. The findings highlight ways in which acquisition editors integrate BookScan data into their daily work within publishing firms, as well the creative ways in which they use BookScan's legitimacy to pursue projects of their choosing. Ten years after the introduction of BookScan, while the data service cannot be ignored, acquisition editors navigate its application, protecting both their cultural capital as 'arbiters of taste' within publishing firms and their ability to promote works they deem to be of cultural value or import.

**Keywords**

Book publishing, BookScan, culture, cultural intermediaries, decision-making, editors, markets

**Introduction**

Since Bourdieu's formulating discussion, cultural intermediaries – those who negotiate and create values for and around cultural products – have been a topic of consistent interest in the study of cultural economy and creative industries. In Bourdieu's terminology, cultural intermediaries are engaged in 'presentation and representation' (1984: 359), within both

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overtly promotional fields (e.g. advertising, marketing, public relations) and fields engaged in the first-order production of cultural content (e.g. fashion design, radio and television production, publishing). Scholarship focused on the melding of career, identity, social class and cultural taste within intermediary occupations has been of special interest in this work (Featherstone, 1991; McRobbie, 2002; Soar, 2002; Wright, 2005).

As part of the 'knowledge class', cultural intermediaries possess a high degree of cultural capital, and as cultural workers they relish their relative 'freedom and autonomy' despite the blurring of boundaries between 'pleasure and obligation' in their work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010: 4). Cosmopolitan in sensibility, they 'attempt to make-over the world of work into something closer to a life of enthusiasm and enjoyment' (McRobbie, 2002: 523). As Beck notes, 'the ideology that cultural work isn't actually work' (2003: 3) is central to this identity and role. While cultural intermediaries may not be financially compensated in line with workers of similar educational and class backgrounds in other fields, they can express their status through the possession of 'a certain amount of cultural authority as shapers of taste' (Nixon and Du Gay, 2002: 497). In short, cultural intermediaries not only mediate values of and around cultural products, but traditionally the tools they have used to do so are thought to be embodied within their identities and status as a special type of worker in a privileged class.

Yet as Entwistle (2006) notes, this recurring emphasis on the identity and lifestyle markers of cultural intermediaries often supplants a direct discussion of what it is that cultural intermediaries are actually mediating. While cultural intermediaries have been discussed with regards to their mediation of 'ideas' and 'money' (Skov, 2002), 'culture' and 'economy' (Lash and Urry, 1994), the boundaries between 'creative personnel' and 'owners and executives' (Hesmondhalgh, 2006) and 'production' and 'consumption' more generally (Negus, 2002), I focus on acquisition editors in publishing houses and their mediation of their own autonomy, agency and latitude in decision-making around cultural products in light of a new, technologically driven, market-based data service. As cultural intermediaries may derive status and cultural capital from a non-work-like understanding of their work that is predicated on their ability to use identity and taste-based rubrics, I focus on their mediation of their own embodied taste with the use of a new, external tool for decision-making.

## Acquisition editors: authority in context

Acquisition editors occupy a key position between authors and readers (DiMaggio, 1977; Greco, 2005), and as such are referred to as 'middlemen' and 'contact men' (Coser et al., 1982), 'boundary spanners' (Hirsch, 1972; Powell, 1985), 'gatekeepers' (Coser, 1975; DiMaggio and Hirsch, 1976; Lane, 1975), 'gatemarkers' (Market, 1985), 'intermediaries' (Williams, 1981) and 'cultural intermediaries' (Bourdieu, 1984, 1996).<sup>1</sup> Although as cultural intermediaries editors have a substantial amount of decision-making authority, they also must mediate evolving institutional organizational and economic controls (Powell, 1985; Thompson, 2010; Thornton, 2004). As part of the 'creative class', within publishing houses editors possess a high degree of cultural capital, but cultural and economic capital also must be deployed to gain placement in an editorial position. Those who work as editors in American trade publishing get jobs through social ties with family and

friends who already work in the industry, and through the signaling of status markers such as as having graduated from a prestigious college (Greco et al., 2007). Reliance on insular networks based on elite dispositional attitudes and high-status cultural tastes significantly depress access to the occupation for underrepresented groups such as racial and ethnic minorities and the working class (Greco et al. 2007; JBHE Foundation, 2000). As publishing firms are located in expensive urban areas and starting salaries hover around \$20,000, more than 42 percent lower than the median entry salary for college graduates, those who will become acquisition editors disproportionately come from privileged class backgrounds (Arnold, 1998). According to *Publishers Weekly's* 2008 annual salary survey, after serving two to six years as an assistant, the median salary for entry-level editors is \$33,000 and still more than \$10,000 lower than the median salaries for college graduates entering other fields.<sup>2</sup> Davidson summarizes:

It's a truism of the industry that most of these jobs are held by people who can afford them – people with some parental support and no student loans. Often they've had unpaid internships, that most pernicious example of class privilege. (2009: 1)

As such, acquisition editors tend to come from backgrounds in which they can trade in low economic returns for the cultural capital that comes from occupying the most 'glamorous job in the editorial world' (Greco, 2005: 123). Working in the creation of consumer goods that are ascribed with artistic merit and cultural import (e.g. a novel, not a widget), and having a considerable amount of freedom in their work, are not only key status markers for acquisition editors but also sites of value and cultural compensation in their occupational roles. As Anand et al. (2004) summarize, while publishing is not 'a particularly profitable business ... publishers and editors could feel sustained not only by their love of books but also by their sense of professional independence' (2004: 12).

Within trade publishing houses, acquisition editors engage in a diverse array of tasks and roles, the majority of which require active engagement in mediating between different values, not least of which involves selecting titles for the firm to publish and having a substantial degree of latitude in making these decisions (Caves, 2000; Hirsch, 1972; Powell, 1985).<sup>3</sup> Greco summarizes the formal and informal duties of acquisition editors in publishing houses:

The acquisition editor represents a publishing company in a convoluted legal, fiduciary, managerial and marketing relationship with a wide variety of individuals in the disparate book community: authors, agents, editorial advisors, book packagers, freelancers, translators, book reviewers and others. *This editor is the company's arbiter of 'beauty and truth', acts as the corporate gatekeeper and plays a substantive role (often the dominant one) in acquiring selecting and supervising the editing of manuscripts ...* Acquisition editors defend a book proposal. Sometimes this means convincing colleagues (fellow editors as well as individuals from sales and publicity) that a project has literary, artistic or financial merit. Occasionally past favors are called on to gather enough votes for a project; sometimes a more forceful strategy is utilized. They learn to cope or they falter. (2005: 124; emphasis added)

Acquisition editors are the key intermediaries who serve on the 'frontlines' in negotiating between art and commerce within a publishing house, and are the primary players in 'the production of the value of the work or, what amounts to the same thing, of the belief in the value of the work' (Bourdieu, 1996: 229). DiMaggio (1977) argues that acquisition editors' high degree of decision-making authority when selecting manuscripts is a function of the unpredictability of financial success for creative goods such as novels, and the resulting pure brokerage administration model based on 'ambiguity, informality and negotiation' under which they work. As M. Lincoln Schuster, co-founder of Simon & Schuster, noted of the usually non-overlapping decision-making roles of editors and publishing houses, 'an editor selects manuscripts, a publisher selects editors' (DiMaggio, 1977: 442). Traditionally, given the pure brokerage organizational model of publishing firms, acquisition editors' aesthetic sensibilities have been a powerful force in title selection within the publishing industry.

In evidence of this emphasis on aesthetic sensibilities, good acquisition editors are described as people who have 'flair – something intangible and intuitive' (Lane, 1975: 35). This intuitive sense of discrimination, or predisposed disposition to the types of books that gain traction through the industry, is frequently discussed as an ineffable quality or character. As Ann Patty, executive editor at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, claims: 'If I don't stop reading a book, I buy it. If I stop in the middle, I don't buy it' (Hogan, 2008: 1). As a result, book publishing has been described as 'a "gut" business' in which 'agents sell books they believe in; publishers need to love them to buy them ... And blind love often takes precedent' (Nelson, 2005: 10). While this practice of 'just loving something' is described as an intuitive sense that is unencumbered by constraints in decision-making, these 'senses' or 'feelings' may alternately signal lurking yet largely unrealized structural effects on decision-making practices. These 'intuitive senses' might be better described as a reliance on discriminatory dispositions in taste resulting both from the habitus from which acquisition editors emerge (Bourdieu, 1984), and the doxa of the industry in which they work (Bourdieu, 1977). As Curran notes of acquisition editors, 'when they say that books select themselves, what they are actually saying is that they choose books within a framework of values they see no need to question' (2011: 177).

This framework of values is developed partially through reliance on 'social circles' within publishing in which industry gossip and news is traded and tastes are informed through critical judgments about 'good' or 'bad' books and authors (Coser et al., 1982; Kadushin, 1976). Acquisition editors frequently change jobs in an effort to work for firms whose lists 'mirror' their own personal taste in books, and as a result their social circles often consist of colleagues and contacts from previous positions. As publishing is a business built on social relationships (Thompson, 2010), these social circles also serve to refine editors' tastes for manuscripts that are likely to gain traction through the industry.

While acquisition editors can frequently go for over a year or several years without a proposed manuscript being rejected by their seniors, as Powell (1985) finds of acquisition editors in university presses, they rarely (if ever) expend the social capital necessary to attempt to buy a manuscript of which others in the firm will not approve. In essence, in lieu of being formally sanctioned, editors self-sanction by pitching titles that the firm's other editors, publicity and sales staff can support. These 'powerful, if unobtrusive

controls' are part of a self-regulated negotiation process in the pure brokerage system of administration (Powell, 1985: 129).

While personal taste is a powerful force in an editor's decision to advocate for a manuscript within a publishing house, in lieu of employing a rationalized and consistent strategy in decision-making, editors use a 'garbage can' model in which various combinations of previous strategies, beliefs, tools, lessons and personal preferences are deployed in a haphazard and inconsistent fashion for any given project (see Cohen et al., 1972). As such, personal taste is intermingled with other strategies such as selecting titles based on genre, imitation of previous successes, author reputation, 'blockbuster' publishing strategies and so forth (Caves, 2000; Thompson, 2010). In addition, the degree to which personal tastes intermingle within the garbage can of other strategies is historically situated and variable. It has been argued that since the early 1970s, acquisition editors have been subjected to increased controls levied by profit-driven conglomerate firms (Moran, 1997; Schiffrin, 2001; Thompson, 2010).

### **Shifting logics in the field**

Thornton and Ocasio (1999) and Thornton (2004) describe a transition in decision-making practices as part of a change in book publishing businesses' organizational structure, from an editorial to market logic. In this shift, firms that once granted editorial autonomy began to be more focused on markets and maximization of short-term profits. Whereas publishing houses once 'focused their attention on strategies of organic growth, [and] hiring and developing editors with the best reputations to build personal imprints' (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999: 808), the attention of publishing executives is now focused on market share and growth through acquisition. The establishment of legitimacy shifted from the personal reputation of the firm's owner and editors to the firm's ability to sustain and grow its market position.<sup>4</sup>

These transitions in institutional logic are thought to have had a dramatic impact on the day-to-day tasks and relative autonomy in decision-making previously granted to acquisition editors. While acquisition editors still rely on their personal tastes and enthusiasm when selecting manuscripts, they must make the case for the works that they select, and negotiate their values in meetings with other editors and staff from marketing, publicity and sales departments (Schiffrin, 2001; Thompson, 2010). Powell describes this phenomena as a 'shift in power within publishing houses – one in which editors are in decline and corporate managers and marketing are in ascendance' (1985: 12). Of key note is that, unlike an editorial logic-driven system in which the orientation toward prestige is internally created through inter-firm practices of decision-making, the actualization of a market logic driven system is dependent on an accurate and data-driven assessment of the successes and failures of one's competitors, as competitors may be potential partners for mergers, and status hierarchies within the industry are oriented around relative market share.

Bourdieu (1996) also highlights the tensions between the 'traditional' ways of publishing and the emergence of a new logic that is focused on accountability and short-term profits. Bourdieu argues that bundled within this new logic is a rating mindset which has taken hold in publishing and related industries:

Even in the most independent sectors of Journalism, ratings have become the Journalist's Last Judgment ... In editorial rooms, publishing houses and similar venues, a 'rating mindset' reigns ... Today ... the market is accepted more and more as a legitimate means of legitimation ... Audience ratings impose the sales model on cultural products. (Bourdieu 1996: 27)

This economic–historical backdrop sets the stage for the industry-wide adoption of BookScan and its potential effects on editorial practice within publishing firms. As shifts in institutional logics since the 1970s brought about new 'rules of the game' (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999: 806), the advent of BookScan served as a technological tool that could be used to turn these new rules of logic into practice. After the release of BookScan, industry analysts predicted not only a loss of autonomy in decision-making for editors, but also an overall decline in the publishing of 'important' books of non-market-driven cultural value.

## The introduction of BookScan

Released in the US in 2001, BookScan is a data service which tracks sales through barcode scanners at bookstore cash registers, capturing an estimated 75 percent of total book sales in the USA (Hughes, 2005).<sup>5</sup> Before the adoption of BookScan, the publishing industry traditionally had relied on bestseller lists that could be easily 'gamed' for promotional purposes (Andrew and Napoli, 2006; Hughes, 2005). The *New York Times Bestseller* list, for example, is limited in that it only provides a list of potential 'likely' sellers for independent bookstores to report on, leading to an over-representation of titles and genres that sell strongly in these outlets (Miller, 2005). With regards to the industry's reliance on bestseller lists before the release of BookScan, Steve Wasserman, former book review editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, summarized a bestseller list as 'a deeply unscientific – one is almost tempted to call it whimsical – compilation, which has a veneer of a certain kind of science' (quoted in Hughes, 2005: 19). BookScan was adopted by all the major publishing houses by 2003 and offered the promise of rectifying these problems in sales reporting within the industry.<sup>6</sup>

Yet the adoption of BookScan is thought to have wider effects upon the industry than merely improving upon and replacing, in some cases, bestseller lists. Andrews and Napoli (2006) call the adoption of BookScan by the US publishing industry a transition to a new market information regime, occurring within a larger cognitive shift across creative industries toward engagement with market-ordered logics in decision-making (Anand and Peterson, 2000). In accordance with Thornton and Ocasio's (1999) discussion of an industry transition to market logic and increased emphasis on firms' relative market share, BookScan was cited as a service that would allow publishers to measure market share in relation to their competitors for the first time. Jim King, former vice president of sales and service for BookScan, made this point directly in *Publishers Weekly*, stating that the service would finally allow publishers to capture 'sales, market size [and] trends' (Reid, 2002: 23). Michael Jacobs, then head of Scholastic's trade publishing division, echoed this sentiment when noting that BookScan 'gives us more insight into the market and into our competitors' (Reid, 2002: 23).



While scholars have argued that the rating mindset and an orientation toward market logic have ordered the publishing industry since the 1970s, the creation of BookScan, a tool that could be used to put logic into practice, incited a new round of concerns about what would happen to 'quality' fiction in the face of newly-available market-driven data. Writing in the *New York Times*, James Atlas, editor-in-chief of Atlas and Co., remarked that 'the fear is that access to real numbers will begin to dictate publishing decisions even more than sales considerations already do', causing 'a flood of commercial titles and a sinking of quality literature' (Atlas, 2001: 19). These concerns were expressed frequently through hierarchies of cultural worth for different genres of books, with industry insiders arguing that bestselling 'unimportant' books would displace works and authors imbued with high degrees of cultural capital. This was the case when readers were asked to 'imagine a world where third-rate versions of Anne Rice shove everyone else off the lists', and when Jennifer Rudolph Walsh, co-head of the literary department for the William Morris agency in New York warned that 'something like [BookScan] could actually be the death of some kinds of literary darlings' (Truitt, 2001: 1).

Of central concern in the industry was the effect that BookScan might have on the decision-making practices of acquisition editors, who were still imbued with high, if somewhat diminished, degrees of decision-making authority. In *Slate*, the author Judith Shulevitz opined that 'editors don't want to know exactly how well their books are selling [because] ... it might force them to stop buying the kinds of books they love publishing – the serious books with limited sales' (Shulevitz, 1998: 1). While editors traditionally had been allowed to rely on their aesthetic judgment when selecting titles, BookScan would cause 'questions of conviction and taste [to] become overridden by the numbers' (Truitt, 2001: 1). Trident Media's Robert Gottlieb even went as far as to suggest that 'editors shouldn't be using [BookScan] unless they're supervised by other people in the house with other information' (Milliot and Zeitchik, 2004: 10).

Despite this proliferation of concerns before, during and immediately following BookScan's widespread adoption by US publishers, to date no study has examined directly how acquisition editors and other employees in trade publishing houses have mediated and incorporated the use of BookScan data into their traditional decision-making practices.

## Method

### *Data collection and participants*

The primary data for this study was collected through open-ended interviews with 42 acquisition editors representing both literary conglomerate and independent trade houses located on the East and West Coast of the USA. This data is supplemented with six consecutive months of participant observation fieldwork in a trade publishing house of literary fiction and non-fiction in which the author sat in on weekly editorial and marketing meetings, wrote reader reports for submitted manuscripts, passed final proofs to press and engaged in sundry tasks within the firm. Additional open-ended interviews were conducted with authors, publishing firms, bookstore employees and owners, publishing industry market analysts and independent contractors who work in the industry as readers, book jacket designers and copy-editors. This three-pronged approach to data collection



within the US trade publishing industry allows for methodological triangulation in which findings are confirmed across multiple techniques (Denzin, 1978). In total, data collection spanned 20 months from August 2008 to April 2010.

## *Procedure*

Interviews with acquisition editors lasted between 30 and 100 minutes and were held over lunch, after work or over the telephone when formal meetings were not possible.<sup>7</sup> The interviews were semi-structured and guided by an interview schedule that was offered to respondents in advance of the interview. Initial questions included four topical areas, two of which provide the foundation for the data presented here: 'What is a typical day/typical publishing process for a manuscript at your firm' and 'What are the decision-making processes that you undertake when examining and developing a new manuscript?' Although questions regarding the uses of BookScan data were not initially included within the interview schedule, observations in the field and the frequency with which respondents raised the topic themselves indicated that BookScan is a vital and decisive phenomenon in acquisition editors' daily work. Thus, as the result of the inductive nature of this work, the interview schedule was adjusted to address more directly how respondents incorporated BookScan data into their daily work.

## **Findings**

### *Editorial practice and the use of BookScan data*

Acquisition editors were quick to cite their love of books as their primary reason for working in the publishing industry. Sarah, a respondent who works at an imprint in New York, said with a laugh, 'I certainly didn't do it for the money!' Sarah also noted that her path into the industry was relatively easy because she had a relative who worked in publishing. The vast majority of respondents started in low or unpaid intern or assistant positions, 'getting coffee, photocopying' and the like, while many of the younger respondents also found positions after enrolling in the Columbia Publishing Course, a six-week, \$7,000 'boot camp' on the publishing industry at the Columbia University School of Journalism in Manhattan. Adele, an editor at a conglomerate firm in New York stated: 'I knew I wanted to work in publishing and I couldn't get a job, not even working for free as an intern.' She described her efforts as 'a lot of wasted time and paper' until a friend told her about the Columbia course, 'which ... opened up some doors, but I still didn't get paid anything for the first year'. As noted in previous works (Coser et al., 1982; Greco et al., 2007), respondents pursued jobs in publishing out of a love for books, relied on ties within the industry to get their first jobs and typically had the financial resources to start out in unpaid and low-paid positions in the industry.

These editors incorporated BookScan data into their decision-making practices in several distinct ways. While editors and publishing executives sometimes used BookScan data, concerns about the service as a direct data-driven replacement for other decision-making strategies is not reflective of how respondents used the service in practice. As Tony, an editor at a New York imprint, phrased it:

I'll log on [to BookScan] if I think it might be helpful, but *just* looking at previous sales figures? No, I couldn't survive [in this industry] doing that ... It only takes one project to realize that the past doesn't predict the future.

While Tony acknowledged that BookScan data are incorporated into some decision-making practices, as was a universal belief among respondents, solely relying on BookScan data was thought to be an ineffective practice.

Instead, BookScan was incorporated into a garbage can model of decision-making strategies and wholly ignored in situations in which the service was not thought to 'fit', such as when deciding to publish the work of a first-time author. Tamara, an editor for a major independent house in New York, noted that BookScan

just isn't a piece of the puzzle when breaking a new author ... without a track record. For new authors, 'Is it well written? Will it connect with people? Is this exciting or different?' are the questions.

While the respondents expressed overall concerns about new authors' ability to break into the industry, they did not feel that BookScan had any net effect on new authors. In practice, they felt that, on the one hand, arguing for new authors in editorial meetings could be difficult because new authors did not have a good, pre-existing track record; on the other hand, new authors did not have a bad pre-existing track record either. In the case of new authors, other factors such as their promotional platforms and the perceived quality (i.e. aesthetic evaluation) of their work played primary roles.

While BookScan may have no net effect on the decision to publish first-time authors, the service is used to look at the track record of already published authors. Rachel, an editor on the east coast, offered a telling example:

[T]his is a business based on trust, an agent wouldn't just lie ... but in the 1990s ... an agent might massage the [sales track] record a little bit. You know, 'It sold 25,000' when it really sold 18,000. If I loved [the manuscript] I'd still buy it if it's at 18,000 or 25,000, but an agent might just pretty the picture because I couldn't really check. That happens less [since the advent of BookScan] because agents know that in 30 seconds I can figure out if they're overly generous on the figures or not.

While BookScan allows acquisition editors to ensure the veracity of the numbers cited by literary agents, Rachel also notes that in some instances a strong belief in the aesthetic quality of a manuscript can take precedent over an author's previous sales figures – a position noted by many research respondents. Editors justify these decisions by highlighting that authors' works are rarely of a consistent quality, with some books in an author's *oeuvre* simply being better than others. Given this predicament, respondents espoused a belief that 'great' manuscripts mattered more than the sales records for previous manuscripts which might be of inferior quality. As was the case with merely relying on BookScan figures, editors work under the general awareness that past sales and future sales may be unrelated.

However, this is not always the case, as Tony lamented:

Sometimes the figures are so bad, I'm asked [by an agent] to look at a third or fourth book and the author is obviously talented, but I just can't sell it [to other people in the house].

For some authors who have failed to connect with readers in the marketplace, their previous sales figures can follow them through the industry like a bad credit score, causing others to be hesitant to do business with them because of past failures. Within this particular case, respondents did express concern about BookScan's impact on the industry. Yet there were ways to minimize the impact of 'bad' numbers, and their use did not apply to all types of titles. In short, despite the adoption of BookScan, a garbage can model of decision-making is still common, as acquisition editors continue to use different types of rubrics for different types of books.

Similar to Sato's (2006) finding from the Japanese university publishing industry, historically American trade firms have relied on differential publishing strategies, categorizing some titles as 'good' and 'quick' sellers that financially support 'slower' sellers, which are often believed to have longer tails for sales and usually of higher cultural value or literary quality. Elizabeth, an acquisition editor at a large independent firm, expressed this sentiment when stating:

Once a year you do your coffee table book about sex or whatever, something you know will sell and that allows you to publish your 'smaller' books.

Acquisition editors felt that using BookScan data to investigate trends within the industry was most valuable when considering titles that were published primarily to be quick sellers and moneymakers. Ian, an editor at a west coast-based imprint of a conglomerate firm, clarified this distinction:

The fear was that accurate numbers would just cause us to just publish bad books: like all of sudden we're not going to love and publish good books anymore. But the passion projects aren't quick sellers anyway. We love good books. We get to publish them in the hopes that they'll be longtime sellers, they'll have a life beyond the first season or first year or second year or third year. Trends on what's 'hot' or what's selling well doesn't hurt quality books. It might inform which books we'll publish to keep the lights on – those are still good books – but the 'hot' projects and the lasting projects depend on each other, and we use different rubrics for them. If we can get better at publishing books that will keep the lights on, then we have more resources to publish books that just *have to* be published ... market research for big books has really made the literary market stronger, despite literary titles not selling as well as everyone had hoped for.

Despite concerns about data-driven decision-making practices having a negative impact on the publication of 'high-quality' works, respondents noted that using BookScan to follow trends is not equally applied to all potential titles. Instead, for books that are published with the express intent of becoming quick sellers that capture a trend, incorporation of BookScan data is more important, whereas for books that are hoped to have a 'timeless' quality, the incorporation of trends from BookScan data is less important. Because of this complimentary, differential publishing strategy, firms use some titles in an effort

to capture immediate economic capital, and other titles in an effort to capture cultural capital and potentially longer, if slower, sales. Despite concerns that BookScan would give publishers the tools to publish 'quick sellers' only, the respondents believed that the service was most frequently applied to titles that were already targeted as 'quick sellers', and that this actually benefited the slower sellers of more literary quality in the long run, as greater success on quick-seller and money-making titles allowed for more risks on slower sellers of a perceived higher quality.

Given this reality, the respondents insisted that comparing different titles that are published under different rubrics and with different intentions misses the point of how the business actually works in practice. Turner, an east coast editor at a major independent imprint, summarized:

Everyone compares books with similar books, [from] authors, agents ... to reviewers. I don't say 'Should I publish this sports biography or this meditative study on death and dying?' I compare sports biographies to sports biographies. Is this a *good* sports biography? Is there anything that makes it special? If I need a sports bio I look for one. I don't *not* look for a meditative death book because I have a good sports book.

Despite needing to publish certain types of books in order to pursue projects deemed to be of lasting import, as is the case under the pure brokerage model (DiMaggio, 1977), the respondents reported having considerable latitude in which manuscripts they decided to pursue, and they looked for positions at other houses that matched their personal tastes to make institutional controls on their selections less necessary. Chandra, who had recently left a conglomerate New York house to work at an independent west coast house, noted: 'I like it here because I get to work on the types of books that I'd be reading anyway.' Working on books she would 'be reading anyway' was important both for her sense of self and her career satisfaction.

While having a sense of personal connection to a manuscript is important in deciding to advocate for it, this personal connection must be converted into other rationales to garner support within the house. Jeremy, an editor at a literary imprint of a conglomerate firm, explained this phenomenon in relation to mistakes that new editors might make when advocating for a manuscript in an editorial meeting:

A young editor could make the mistake of pitching the details of the book too much ... too much plot ... a long story about how the main character comes to a realization about his life. Those details might be true, but they won't help anyone else understand why [the book] makes sense on our list or what outlets to pitch ... [or] the sales potential for the title.

It is in these situations – ones in which acquisition editors must convert their personal desires to work on a manuscript into something that other editors and marketing staff can support – in which the use of BookScan becomes creative. This was seen most clearly in the use of BookScan data when preparing profit and loss statements within the firm and for selecting comparative ('comp') titles as the book moves beyond the firm. While profit and loss statements are revised throughout the process of a book's developmental editing, first they are constructed by editors in preparation for pitching a potential title at

an editorial meeting and contain estimates for a book's sales potential, associated costs, subsidiary rights and so forth. Ian explains his process with the profit and loss statement:

The key to a P&L [profit and loss] is making the numbers work. Even if I've already decided to pitch a book, I know that I have to start from the 'back' (bottom of the statement) because I know what the target should be and what is reasonable and then I fill back in ... If the numbers won't work, the advance has to be lowered, or I have to really think if I can reasonably argue for a higher total sales figure. So [I] look at the authors' previous sales figures and different 'comps' and see what might be reasonable ... [laughing] you can always make it work. Well, not always – but you can usually make it work.

Here, BookScan data is not used to make decisions, but instead is used to both legitimize and refine decisions that have been made already. Although more than 85 percent of published trade books fail to return on investment (Caves, 2000), in the vast majority of cases acquisition editors must create profit and loss statements that make it look like the manuscript they want to publish *will* return on investment. Much like the way in which Ian uses BookScan to present a reasonable, if 'sunny', guess about a manuscript that he has chosen to advocate for, comp titles are used to signal to other players in the industry which books a new title might be similar to: a good comp might be a recent title of similar topic or format, or one believed to possess similar qualities. However, in practice, data from BookScan are often applied to 'comp' titles as a tool to legitimize the value of titles already selected. Jonathan, a respondent at an imprint in New York, explained the data-driven use of comp titles: 'Selecting comp titles is an art. Like the three bears, the porridge has to be "just right".' In practice, a bestseller may not be a good comp title, as it signals unrealistic expectations that others in the industry may not believe. Instead, comp titles are used to convey a firm's reasonably optimistic expectations for their new title and to signal minimized risk. As Rachel explains:

Comp titles tell a story, you know, any story really. They're shorthand to tell a story, so the process works backwards. After coming up with a story, comp titles make the story make sense.

Across the variety of firms and respondents included in this study, the creative, strategic use of BookScan data to 'tell a story' about new titles was a common practice in which editors, editorial teams in publishing meetings and publishers and distributors engaged. In each of these settings, employees would suggest alternate comp titles: that is, they would suggest that supporters of the project might examine the sales records for previously unconsidered comp titles that may 'tell the story' of a new project in a more convincing way. Similarly, practices of alternately questioning or reifying the veracity of BookScan data were creatively deployed depending on the needs of the individual project. As James, a west coast editor at an independent firm who also used the storytelling metaphor, noted:

I need to create a coherent story, so if the numbers help tell that story I say 'You know, BookScan says this,' but if the BookScan numbers don't help me tell my story, I say 'You know, BookScan says this, but it only captures 75 percent of the market, so we should focus on this other thing'.

Here even the potential veracity of BookScan figures are creatively employed in differential ways depending on the needs of the project. When other editors were asked if they were familiar with James' strategy, many said they were, while others said they were unfamiliar with it but might use it in the future. Overall, although it has been argued that BookScan data would lead to a scientific rationalization of editorial decision-making practices in accordance with market-driven logic, BookScan data itself and the use of it in practice, is creatively and differentially employed by acquisition editors in non-intended ways to garner support for projects which have been selected along alternative, competing logics of sense-making.

## Discussion and conclusion

### *The effects of BookScan and the literary field*

While the market-driven sales data available through BookScan surely has some impact on the purchasing decisions for some titles in the US trade publishing industry, in practice, editors and other publishing professionals have incorporated BookScan sales figures in both intended and unintended ways. For some books (such as potential quick sellers), acquisition editors use BookScan more heavily to inform their purchasing decisions, and for other books (such as potentially longer sellers deemed to be of higher cultural value) editors use perceptions of the service's legitimacy or illegitimacy more heavily to publish books of their choosing. In editors' daily practice of mediating values around cultural products, the use of BookScan itself is also mediated and incorporated into already existing intuitive, taste-based tools for decision-making. As such, shifts to a rating mindset or market logic, and the tools used to put these logics into practice, should not be described as totalizing; instead, they might be viewed as shifting frames for emphasis or consideration within the garbage can model that acquisition editors employ. While BookScan cannot be avoided and to some degree has changed the rules of the game, the service is used in unintended ways, and in practice its intended use has been repurposed into servicing pre-existing purposes and strategies.

Through one lens it can be argued that editors creatively find ways to preserve the publication of 'quality' works of cultural import despite publicly stated concerns about the adoption of BookScan; yet through another lens, editors are not merely 'protecting' cultural value, as they are protecting their own status and autonomy also as the shapers of cultural value within publishing houses. As Wright notes of bookstore employees in intermediary roles, acquisition editors are not merely serving as 'the taste leaders of a reflexive modernity', but are also "shoring up" their insecure position in the relations of cultural capital' (2005: 105). As such, it would be a mistake to reproduce the equation of popularity with vulgarity off-handedly, or to reproduce editors' dispositional tastes for certain works and efforts to publish them as based on an objectively more refined, artistic, long-lasting or meaningful quality of those works.<sup>8</sup> The creative use and misuse of BookScan not only works in service of certain types of literature, but also to preserve the autonomy, cultural capital and special status of cultural intermediaries on which it otherwise might impinge.

In turn, as is seen in the case of ‘comp’ titles, the creative misuse of BookScan as a promotional ‘storytelling’ tool is a practice that is both widely acknowledged and collaboratively engaged in across different points in the production and promotion chain. This may signal a larger and meaningful decoupling both within firms and throughout the industry as a whole, in which stated organizational and industry-wide formal policies are disconnected from actual practices (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). As such, US trade publishing on the whole may still operate as a ‘gut business’, despite the industry-wide adoption of a veneer of scientific rigor. Future work might investigate if this is true across creative industries.<sup>9</sup> As Napoli (2010) notes, despite an increased emphasis on audience metrics and market research within commercial cultural firms, to date these strategies have continued to prove unsuccessful in capturing the audience’s tastes. This reality means that in addition to editors preserving their own status and promoting works that match their tastes, there may be another logic at work. If data-driven approaches such as those offered through BookScan are ultimately ineffective in predicting the financial success of future cultural products, who better to intuitively be aware of this reality than those who are tasked with utilizing them?

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## Notes

1. Bourdieu uses the term ‘publisher’ on two levels, both to refer to publishing firms more generally and editors working within publishing firms specifically. For an example of the latter use, as applied here, see Bourdieu, 1996: 168. The use of the term ‘editor’ in this work is meant to connote ‘acquisition’ or ‘commissioning’ editors, not ‘copyeditors’ who are a different specialized employee within publishing firms.
2. While the *Publishers Weekly* annual salary survey might provide a reasonable estimate of editorial salaries, it suffers from both self-selection bias, and from bias in the self-reporting of salary. Despite the common citation of these figures they should be viewed as rough ‘best guess’ estimates, despite the prevalence of their use.
3. ‘Trade’ publishing refers to a particular market in book publishing, and denotes firms and titles that one might typically find in a commercial bookstore. While probably the most visible sector of the publishing industry, trade publishing makes up about one third of the total U.S. book market. The trade sector follows its own logic, and discussions of it are best held as distinct from other book markets such as the education market or the market for professional manuals.
4. See Table 1 in Thornton and Ocasio (1999: 809).



5. In the United States BookScan only captures 75% of the trade market as it does not record sales through 'untraditional' channels (e.g. gift shops) or through Wal-Mart and other 'big box' retailers such as Sam's Club or BJ's. The service is provided by The Nielsen Company, a subsidiary of the Dutch conglomerate VNU.
6. Of note publishers also rely on data from R.R. Bowker, which reports how many ISBN numbers were registered in different market categories by publishers, but does report actual sales.
7. Pseudonyms are used when quoting respondents.
8. To further the point, as Bourdieu argues that both academics and cultural intermediaries are part of the dominated faction of the dominant class, academics *in particular* should be wary of the potential homology in tastes between these two groups (i.e. between acquisition editors and the academics who study them), as within Bourdieu's framework those within these occupations ostensibly share dispositions for some cultural objects and not for others. This point is raised to temper what may be a too-easy story about editors creatively using BookScan to preserve what are objectively 'more meaningful' cultural forms, despite their beliefs in doing so.
9. For example, Zafirau (2007) presents a similar case in Hollywood film production.

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