

John B.  
Thompson at  
Lund University

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The Faculties of Humanities and Theology invited Professor John B. Thompson to a conference on scholarly publishing within humanities and social sciences April 26th 2006. His lecture was called *Academic Publishing at the Crossroads*. John B. Thompson, who is a very well known Cambridge sociologist and also one of the founders of Polity Press, has spent a few years to examine the transformation of academic and higher education publishing in Britain and the US. He was very surprised by the fact that colleagues within the academic world knew so little about the conditions for scholarly publishing and that so little research has been done in this field. He says "those whose lives are spent within higher education know surprisingly little about this industry upon which their own activities – and to some extent their careers and livelihoods – depend". The result of his research was published last year in an almost 500 pages volume called *Books in the Digital Age – The Transformation of Academic and Higher Education Publishing in Britain and the United States*, Polity Press 2005. The book has been described as a "landmark study" on the publishing industry and is mentioned with great respect by scholars, publishers, librarians and others.

In his introduction to the book John B. Thompson states that “the book publishing industry today is going through a process of change which is probably as profound as anything it has experienced since Johann Gutenberg adapted the traditional screw press for the purposes of manufacturing printed texts”. In his attempt to explain the key changes that are transforming the book publishing industry today he is concentrating on different publishing fields. The field of academic publishing (scholarly publishing and college textbook publishing) “cannot be understood without considering the relations between this field, on the one hand, and the field of higher education (including the world of university libraries) at the other. These fields are not the same, they have different social and institutional characteristics, but they are locked together through multiple forms of interdependency.” (Page 7) Besides, there are some broader developments that have had an impact on all publishing. Thompson is mentioning four important changes that have influenced the whole publishing industry. First, the growing concentration of resources – even if he at the same time claims that the growing concentration of power and resources has been less noticeable in academic publishing partly because of the distinctive role of university presses. The second development is the changing structure of markets and channels to markets, and he specially mentions the changes in the retail business i.e. bookshop chains and online bookshops. The third development is the globalization of markets and publishing firms. This development is closely connected to the rise of English as the de facto international language, but he also states that even publishers working in languages other than English are finding that the conditions in which they operate are changing, partly as a result of the growing dominance of English and the increasing international circulation of ideas, authors and content. (Page 9) The fourth development is the impact of new technologies.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part gives a concentrated history lesson to the publishing business, starting with the close relation between printers and publishers, (Cambridge University Press is still operating both a publishing and printing division!) followed by a description of the publishing cycle (the decisions to take on a project, financial decisions, decisions about stocks etc.), the publishing chain and the economics of publishing. The first part ends with a very close look at the development of the publishing field since 1980. This is an important background in order to understand the big changes within the publishing industry.

The second part – from my point of view maybe the most interesting – is called “The Field of Academic Publishing”. This is the part where John B. Thompson examines the conditions for the scholarly monograph in all its details and shows us how complex the relation is between university presses, libraries, scholars and university decision makers. There are around one hundred university presses in the English-speaking world and many of them have faced great

difficulties during the last years. John B. Thompson points out some interesting differences between the university presses. While the presses in US are operating mostly at the North American market and are often getting support from their host institutions, the UK university presses are operating on an international market and are left with little understanding and support from their universities.

The decline of the scholarly monograph has been well known since the middle of the 1980's, and at his lecture in Lund as well as in his book John B. Thompson urges the scholars themselves to take greater responsibility for the whole system of scholarly communication and the tenure system which he argues is too dependent on the publication of scholarly monographs specially in humanities and social sciences. He quotes Stephen Greenblatt, former president of MLA, who in a letter to the members in 2002 wrote: "faculty members find themselves in a maddening double bind. They face a challenge – under inflexible time constraints and with very high stakes – that many of them may be unable to meet successfully, no matter how strong or serious their scholarly achievements, because academic presses simply cannot afford to publish their books." (Page 179)

In the third part of his book, "The Field of Higher Education Publishing", John B. Thompson is looking into the business of textbook publishing. In the same way as academic publishing has to be understood within the academic community, higher education publishing has to be understood in relation to the pedagogical activities of higher education. It is very impressive to see, once again, that John B. Thompson has not left any aspect of this field of publishing unexamined. Especially the development of additional material to textbooks is of great interest. First floppy discs, laser discs, CD-ROMs, and today dedicated or companion websites. In addition to the discussion on textbooks he also looks in to the used books market or the second-hand book market and the implications for the publishers within higher education publishing.

"The Digital Revolution" is the title of the last part of the book. To write a book on the developments within the digital publishing world is almost a mission impossible. The business is changing rapidly and some of the companies that Thompson mentions is already out of the market, but this doesn't change the fact that this book is the most comprehensive overview on digital publishing that I have ever read.

I should have mentioned earlier that Thompson has interviewed 230 publishers and scholars within the industry for this book. In the beginning of the chapter on the digital revolution he quotes a joke that has been running among publishers for a few years stating that "the only way to make money out of electronic publishing is to organize conferences on it!" This quote says a lot about the

difficulties within electronic publishing and I would strongly recommend everybody – scholars, publishers, librarians – to read *Books in the Digital Age* in order to become better discussion partners in the development of new ways to shape the future arena for academic and higher education publishing.

#### References:

Thompson, John B., *Books in the digital age : the transformation of academic and higher education publishing in Britain and the United States* . Polity Press, 2005

ISBN: 0-7456-3477-X ISBN: 0-7456-3478-8 (pbk.)

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