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‘Taste and/or big data?: Post-digital editorial selection’

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Biographical Note

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Abstract

Trade publishing has been transformed by the interventions of digital technologies in workflow, products, sales, marketing and distribution, placing the twenty-first century industry in a post-digital age. Editorial commissioning, however, remains a largely traditional process, in which the individual editor’s taste, judgement, and gut instinct combines with company behaviour and market environment in selection processes. Drawing on analyses of publishing’s gatekeeping processes, and a dataset of interviews with UK commissioning editors, the article argues that while, for the main, editorial selection does not currently incorporate big data and algorithmic processes, its reasons for so doing might reside in the need to retain the human within publishing processes, and an evasion of the ‘machine imitating human’.

Taste and/or big data?: Post-digital editorial selection

““What if a machine could discover the next blockbuster novel?”” This provocation is the cover strapline for Jodie Archer and Matthew L Jockers’ *The Bestseller Code* (2016), which details discoveries based on the text mining of thousands of contemporary novels, working from the hypothesis that ‘bestsellers have a distinct set of subtle signals, a latent bestseller code’.¹ Archer and Jockers go on to provide a series of metaphors for their computational findings: that of ‘bestselling DNA’, and the ‘secret sauce of hitting the *NYT* [*New York Times* bestseller] list’.² Using topic modelling and stylometrics, Archer and Jockers identified which titles were bestsellers and which not from a corpus of 20,000 novels with an 80% success rate. As such, their work brings digital humanities techniques and the philosophies of distant reading and macroanalysis into the 21st century literary marketplace (a period that has been relatively lightly touched by such approaches).³ The project, they claim, not only sheds light on past literary practices, but could even shape future literary performance. What impact, they ask, might the act of ‘the machine imitating editor’ have?⁴

In their response to this question, Archer and Jockers are keen to assert that the process of becoming a bestselling writer takes time, and that there is no ‘easy formula’ for success that a putative writer could take and apply from their ‘bestseller code’.⁵ A machine-generated novel (such as that envisioned in Philippe Vasset’s 2003 *ScriptGenerator*) is also not what Archer & Jockers claim their findings will enable.⁶ This article, however, focuses on how machine-based reading might confront the traditional practices of the publishing industry, most notably those of the commissioning or acquisitions editor.

In setting up their argument, Archer and Jockers ask rhetorically what the purpose of machine reading might be, when ‘agents and editors do a good job of putting books in front of consumers’.⁷ They implicitly answer their own question by referring to book publishing’s ‘language of gambling’, the ‘casino’ of the acquisitions meeting, the ‘wet finger held up in the air’, and ‘the mysterious crystal ball’.⁸ While some individual editors might ‘have a particular reputation for the Midas touch’, elsewhere in the industry, they imply, lie failure,

excess, and bad risks.⁹ The ‘good job’ performed by agents and editors is damned with faint praise.

Archer and Jockers’ intervention comes at a time when the publishing industry is under duress. Disruption and disintermediation brought about by digital technologies and technology companies have already brought substantial change to publishing, as I explored with Padmini Ray Murray, in the (re)drawing of a digital publishing communications circuit of the book.¹⁰ These twenty-first century processes of disruption and disintermediation had themselves been prefaced by a late twentieth-century movement in global publishing towards conglomeration and increasing commercialisation: the ‘marketing of literature’ and the ‘merchants of culture’ as scholarly studies on the period had it.¹¹ The advent of online bookselling (pioneered and established in the mainstream by Amazon); the subsequent development of digital platforms and social reading sites for non-professionalised readers to comment upon, review, promote and share their reading via Amazon’s Customer Comments, blogs, vlogs, Goodreads, and other social media; the mainstreaming of ebooks (largely via Amazon, at least in the UK); the possibilities for social media to promote authors and book-based brands; and the advent of self-publishing platforms (e.g. Kindle Direct Publishing, Wattpad), have moved publishing’s stages of digitisation from workflow to encompass sales, distribution, marketing and production. Book publishing is thus already operating within a ‘post-digital’ environment, which, in Florian Cramer’s definition,

in its simplest state describes the messy state of media, arts and design after their digitisation (or at least the digitisation of crucial aspects of the channels through which they are communicated.) Sentiments of disenchantment and scepticism may also be part of the equation, though this need not necessarily be the case – sometimes, ‘post-digital’ can in fact mean the exact opposite.¹²

Publishing’s products are certainly digitised, with the creation and sale of ‘vanilla’ ebooks (i.e. straight ‘text’ files created alongside print copies as opposed to an enhanced and/or born-digital app) near-ubiquitous in the UK and US markets.¹³ However, more recent statistics from the UK publishing market have shown ebook sales for the ‘Big Five’ trade publishers (Hachette, HarperCollins, Pan Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster) first plateauing, then, in 2015, collectively falling 2.4% in volume terms, a downward trend which continued in 2016.¹⁴ The commentary prompted by this drop showed those (in

Cramer's words) disenchanted by, and sceptical of, digital technologies duly enlivened by the seeming re-emergence of print. As the features editor of the industry trade journal *The Bookseller* summed up, 'For those who predicted the death of the physical book and digital dominating the market by the end of this decade, the print and digital sales figures [...] might force a reassessment.'¹⁵ Simon Jenkins opened his commentary in the *Guardian* on the decline of ebook sales with a sigh of relief: 'At last. Peak digital is at hand. The ultimate disruptor of the new information age is ... wait for it ... the book.'¹⁶ Publishing, Jenkins continued, had 'suffered a bad attack of technodazzle', spurred on by 'digital's hysterical cheerleaders'.¹⁷

The seemingly print-positive figures which caused such paperphiliac delight only relate, however, to the five biggest publishers, and do not include the hinterland of self-published ebooks. Figures from November 2015 show self-published ebooks constituting 26% of volume sales on Amazon.co.uk – a figure not far short of the Big Five's 31%.¹⁸ The high level of production enabled by self-publishing platforms, alongside the muscular interventions of technology companies (Amazon, Apple, Google) into the traditional publishing space, demonstrate a rapidly changing publishing ecosystem. Decriers of self-publishing question the qualities of the work produced, which has undergone no filtering or gatekeeping process (with Kindle Direct Publishing, for example, explicitly stating how its platform cuts out the expensive and time-costly middleman of the publisher).¹⁹ More positive accounts of self-publishing note its democratising tendencies in the rise of the 'amateur' or 'indie' author, and its overturning of traditional literary practices of authority and authorship.²⁰

The post-digital age of publishing (arguably the same period defined by Ted Striphas as 'the late age of print'), then, fuses technological advancement and cultural scepticism, digital evangelism and pragmatic acceptance of changing business models and practices.²¹

Traditional publishers operating within this contemporary period, and the new, frequently disruptive, entrants into the literary marketplace, are aware of and – in at least some cases – highly attuned to the possibilities and challenges of big data and algorithmic selection. For traditional publishers, big data offers a potential solution to one of their traditional marketing problems: discoverability. For non-traditional entrants, it provides the mechanisms by which the content populating their platforms (which is often freely produced by prosumers and amateur authors) is shared, managed, and monetised. As Gail Rebeck, Chair of Penguin

Random House, commented at the London Book Fair's Quantum conference in 2016, 'Today our job as publishers is made easier, and infinitely more sophisticated, by terabytes of digital research and sophisticated insight tools that enable us to segment audiences by their passions and their literary tastes'.²² And yet, within the same speech, Rebeck simultaneously argued for a more traditional way of viewing publishing, with books as the 'DNA of our civilisation', with global bestsellers built on 'brilliant' marketing, publicity and sales, and:

also crucially depende[nt] on editors and publishers with real insight, confidence in their own judgement and often, nerves of steel – much the same process as it has been to develop and grow authors all the time I have been in this industry. After all, that is why publishers were put on this earth – to sift, curate and nurture the talents and direction of authors but, most of all, to follow their instincts and connect readers with their unimagined future and what they didn't even know they were looking for.²³

Rebeck's speech prefigures the discussion of this article: the question of how the traditional editorial functions of taste and selection operate alongside digital technologies. What, then, is the role of the commissioning editor in mainstream publishers within this post-digital environment? Do they continue to operate as gatekeepers, filtering content and making selections for potential readers?

In order to address the question of editorial selection in the post-digital age, this article examines editorial decision-making, first via a number of practitioner and scholarly accounts, and second, through a set of interviews recently conducted with a number of UK commissioning editors. In the former, accounts of the traditional editorial role emphasise its risk-taking aspects, but also the management of risk-taking as a core business strategy.²⁴ Gill Davies, in her how-to *Book Commissioning and Acquisition*, dwells on the issue of 'intuition versus facts', echoing Archer and Jockers' comments by saying that 'How editors choose books to publish remains the most mysterious question for people outside of publishing and, indeed for those inside who never get a proper glimpse of the process'. She immediately goes on to demystify the process, but nonetheless concludes that 'One of the infuriating things about books and publishing is that just as you appear to have formulae and models nicely sewn up, books come along that disprove them and the market behaves in wholly unanticipated ways.'²⁵ Susan Greenberg, framing her series of interviews with editors, comments that 'In the popular imagination, the editor is a passive creature, busy telling

people “No””. This popular imagination, argues Greenberg, casts the editor as the ““gatekeeper””, with ‘selection’ at the heart of that process.²⁶ For Italian publisher Roberto Calasso, examining the role of the publisher in the face of the digital ‘*cloud of information*’, as he puts it, the primary function of the publisher is that of ‘*judgment*, that primeval capacity to say yes or no’. That ‘undeniable prerogative’, as he also calls it, however, is at risk of being made redundant in the post-digital age of excess.²⁷ Simone Murray argues that ‘the digital literary sphere further erodes many of the traditional gatekeeper roles (“publisher,” “editor,” “critic”)’.²⁸

How to deal with the ‘world of excess’ and the ‘context of too much’ enabled by digital technologies is the subject of Michael Bhaskar’s *Curation* (2016).²⁹ Equating the role of the editor to the broader, twenty-first century usage of the term ‘curator’, Bhaskar argues that:

Critics, editors, merchandisers, yes, curators, are all seen as subservient to the creator. These roles are increasingly important, but they are regarded as being below creator in the pecking order. Most of us probably feel that is right. But as we experience more overload I think the balance should shift a little.³⁰

Bhaskar then links the practices of curators to that of selection and taste ‘in a world of machines and Big Data’, arguing that ‘the arts of connoisseurship aren’t dead in the age of algorithmic selection – they’re augmented’.³¹ Moreover, he comments that curators, including editors, are ‘expert selectors’ who have ‘studied or practised for years to build a body of knowledge. Their curation is based on judgements and instincts honed by tens of thousands of hours of learning and immersion. Good taste, one diffuse but central idea behind curated selections, is carefully cultivated.’³² He thereby promotes experience, expertise, and knowledge as central to curation and editorial selection.

To further test the question of whether post-digital editorial selection sees traditional modes of gatekeeping and taste ‘formation’³³ in contradiction to – or, as Bhaskar argues – augmented by big data, I examine findings from a sample set of nineteen semi-structured interviews with UK-based commissioning editors. I conducted the interviews (both face-to-face and by Skype) in the first half of 2016 with individuals who all had responsibility for selecting texts for publication within their company. Some worked within large or medium-sized publishing companies as senior or more junior employees, whereas others were owner-

publishers at the helm of small independents. All undertook the role of ‘commissioning’, though their job titles varied from publisher, to publishing director, to editor. The individuals were predominantly female (c80%), very largely middle class (I asked interviewees about their own identity, so most self-declared their class or discussed it in terms of education and/or parental background), and all were white. The sample set I draw upon is necessarily limited, intentionally if not wilfully small, and is focused on the ungeneralizable responses of individual editors. Yet their individual and collective responses form part of an ongoing project conducted by various scholars of contemporary literary sociology, underpinned in my case by the interdisciplines of the history of the book and publishing studies.³⁴ Instead of a quantitative, distant reading, a ‘midlevel’ approach is taken, examining, in John Frow’s terminology, a professionalised ‘regime of reading’ enacted, in this case, by commissioning editors in publishing companies.³⁵ The interview data I draw on includes both actual practices within publishing companies (including practical processes such as editorial meetings and other decision-making structures), but also on the discursive strategies surrounding those practices; the ways, in other words, in which the editors choose to talk about their processes of editorial selection in a post-digital era. The interview findings are presented anonymously, although with indicators of the size and formation of the company within which they are operating; and move from discussions of taste and its operations in the company environment, to the marketing possibilities of a title, to the practical decision-making processes, and to the impact of digital technologies on their practice, which – as I unfold – was relatively limited.

I began my interviews by asking about editors’ sense of their own taste when faced with their submissions, and how this intersected with the larger organisational structure of their company and its decision-making processes. For many, the immediate response to this question centred around terms such as ‘instinct’ and ‘gut reaction’. One editor, an owner-publisher in a small independent, described her approach to commissioning in visceral terms: ‘it’s more a kind of emotional feeling, or something in the pit of your stomach... it’s all quite an unconscious thing to be honest [...] instinctive, yes, no, yeah, or feeling that something is right’. For another editor, also in a small company but not the owner, ‘You almost learn to trust how your body is reacting to something because those books that you got super excited about are then going to be a hit, and then you think, “I’ve got that feeling again.”’ Other interviewees explained how such gut reactions are developed over years as learned skills rather than pure instinct. One editor from a mid-sized independent used an analogy from

another profession to explain the seemingly instinctive reaction of the experienced commissioning editor: ‘It’s like if you get a good ... doctor who diagnosed a million cases ... you get quite quick at recognising the symptoms.’ This interviewee referred to the experience, expertise and knowledge that Bhaskar discerns at the heart of curation and editorial selection.

The development of ‘taste’ proved, for several of the interviewees, to be a conflicted area for discussion. For one owner-publisher, commissioning decisions for their small list were ‘very much based on our tastes’ (‘our’ being that of the publisher and her business partner). However, this editor went on to comment that, ‘When I was thinking about talking to you about this, I thought, we just publish what we want. And then I thought, that’s not quite right. We’ve had to moderate that slightly ... There are certain restrictions.’ Similarly, another editor in a small independent noted that she and her business partner had ‘different tastes’, which she felt broadened their commissioning base. The same publisher was concerned ‘about imposing my own taste on the list too much’, and publishing for herself rather than the market, and the broader demographics within it. Another editor in a mid-sized conglomerate discussed how his liking for crime fiction influenced the establishment of a crime list at his company. This was a commercial move, but developed from his own reading preferences. Some publishers problematised the idea of taste, with one editor from a mid-sized company seeing it as ‘a strange, slightly effete aristocratic idea, when actually it’s about [...] skill [...] about understanding technically how storytelling works and [...] what a character’s trying to do, and how people are going to relate to it.’ This editor’s comments relate to the discussion of skills development in commissioning, with another editor (this time from a conglomerate publisher), confirming that ‘you just get more and more clear about what it is you’re looking for, and also you’ve published more books ... it’s that balance of the list.’

For other editors, their individual and personal taste worked effectively because it coincided with the company’s requirements and market demands in various ways. This fit between an individual’s taste, the company environment and the market differs from publisher to publisher, as one editor commented: ‘You’re always looking, when you’re commissioning, it’s about your taste, but it’s also about what’s missing from the company that you’re at, and [my company] was missing women...’ Another conglomerate-based editor discussed joining a publisher whose imprint she admired, but with the brief to create a new list of authors:

It was mostly a case of starting from scratch and building a list...to your taste, but [...] there's obviously a remit there and you can't just ... make it all about you and blithely follow your nose and do what you like, but ... there's a chance of [...] joining an imprint which was the imprint all over my bookshelves and meant something to me, and to ... you know, form your own list rather than ... tak[ing] on a list which had been managed by someone else, [that] was very appealing.³⁶

What was evident in the interviews was that editors needed to fit their editorial taste-making and selection to their company environment. Gut reactions were, in actuality, learned business decisions, in constant negotiation with that environment. Reflecting on her career moves between companies, one editor commented, 'There are books which I have bought here [in a mid-sized company] that I would not have tried to buy at [her previous conglomerate employer] because... it wouldn't have been the right place to do it. And vice versa.' Decisions about whether to publish are also based on the overall shape of the company or imprint's list, which one conglomerate editor described as a 'quite complicated balance', later expanding to say that 'quite often I already have a writer that's very similar to [a submission] and I love my writer more, and so it would be wrong to bring somebody else who's not quite as good'. One editor in a small independent had a strong sense of the overall balance of their publications: 'I will get to a point where I look at the list [...and] get a feeling of, "You know what? It seems like we've done a lot of literary depressing books. It must be too many. I'm ready now for something lighter. The list needs something lighter."' Another small publisher agreed, commenting that even if she liked a new novel, if it was 'similar to one you're already publishing, they're just too close to it. It's just not a good idea to take it if the themes are the same.'

For editors in companies both large and small, the decision about whether to take the book forward to an acquisitions meeting, or the commissioning stage, frequently revolved around its potential to be marketed. As an editor in a conglomerate said, 'I'm often thinking, what would the one-line pitch for the book be?... Does it grip me, how are people going to hear about it, how are you going to recommend it?' For the owner-publisher, 'the discussion will often be around ... How will we market it? How will we sell it? What will be the selling points? How are we going to make a readership for it? Because however much we love a book, there's no point in publishing it if no-one else is going to like it.'

The processes of decision-making varied substantially between small or mid-sized and conglomerate publishers. For the former, the decisions could be swift, with one individual making up his or her own mind, or needing to persuade only his or her business partner. ‘If we can’t convince each other,’ said one, ‘we’re not going to convince buyers, are we?’ For another small publisher, it was a question, particularly with non-fiction, of ‘whether it’s advisable to publish something or not, whether it is right for the list or if it’s going to be far too much work to take it through.’ How much editorial work might be required is therefore important to that decision, as is its marketing potential. The same editor asserted that within a small business, ‘We must trust each other’s judgement’, while for another the process was very much a discursive one, in which she and her partner ‘generally agree with one another’, but disagreements and persuasion are also important. For an editor working within a small company, although not as the owner, the decision-making was swift. If she wanted to buy a book, she sought agreement from the owner to offer after he read a short sample, with the owner trusting to her judgement.

For editors working within mid-sized or conglomerate publishers, there was a much more formal process for acquisition. At one conglomerate publisher, this involved a weekly editorial meeting for the imprint staff (editors, but also publicists, the rights director, and production), followed by an acquisitions meeting, attended by the heads of imprints, the sales and rights directors, and the editors who were presenting books for consideration. The acquisitions meeting took the form of a pitch, but editors needed to demonstrate they already had the backing of the sales team, or colleagues selling internationally. The process had become ‘almost forensic’. Another conglomerate editor described a similar structure, with the second meeting attended by heads of department. Before that meeting, the editor would send around a ‘pitch email’, with bullet points of information: ‘one line about the book, where you would sell it, what you would compare it to, interesting things about the author, has it sold internationally, what can we do in terms of marketing, publicity’. Heads of department might then express personal opinions about the book, but were really expected to respond in terms of their job role, addressing, for example, whether it might sell through supermarket chains, or how the market for particular genres was moving. The meeting, chaired by the Managing Director, would decide whether the company could try to acquire the title. The sales department would then work out projected sales figures leading to a pre-acquisition book costing, which would determine the level at which an editor could make an offer.

Notwithstanding a calculation for ebook sales and the online selling of print books, this process is not that different from the one I encountered when I worked for a conglomerate trade publisher in the largely pre-digital 1990s. When I asked editors about how digital technologies might affect their commissioning decisions (as opposed to the technologies' broader impact on publishing's business models), their responses largely showed them to be operating using the same paradigms that were in place in the 1990s. Nonetheless, there were various ways in which editors discussed how digital technologies were fusing with commissioning practices in the 2010s, bringing together traditional approaches with digitally-enabled processes. Ebooks were taken as a given as a publication mode for all the editors I spoke to. Most read their submissions digitally, loading potential titles onto Kindles or other digital devices to read while commuting or working at home in the evening or at the weekends. Such work patterns are not unusual with commissioning editors, with one commenting that when asked, 'do you sit at your desk and read all day[?]', her response is that 'I do that all in my spare time'. Another claimed to love her Kindle because it meant she no longer had to spend Friday afternoon printing out the first few pages of submissions for weekend reading, only to discover that she had left the remainder of the manuscript of the one she loved in the office. A small number of editors preferred to read submissions in print, while realising the convenience of digital reading. One keen professional digital reader stated that she 'read physical books for fun', her leisure reading away from the demands of time-pressured decision making.

The assessment of an author's capacity to engage with promotion via social media was an evident consideration for interviewees, although all demonstrated both moderation and scepticism. One, for example, mentioned Facebook and Twitter as 'a good way of getting a sense of what an author is like [...] whether an author is going to be [...] savvy', while nonetheless expressing that 'it's slightly hard to say how many copies these things actually sell'. One owner-publisher stated that she would check 'what's happening on Google and [...] on Twitter', but operated a 'really strict rule that we will never pressure any of our authors into taking up social media, into giving readings if they're not comfortable on stage'. This editor's ethical stance towards her authors is cognisant of the pressures on the author-promoter (in Juliet Gardiner's formulation), which extends to new forms of public platform in the digital realm beyond more traditional meet-the-author activities.³⁷ The possibilities for community-building were a positive attribute for one conglomerate editor, who saw her authors initially develop as blog reviewers, thereby generating themselves 'a little community

of supporters' before they came to publish a book themselves, and a support network in the often 'lonely job' of being a writer. The proliferation of websites and blogs devoted to writing and getting published was perceived as an advantage by the same editor, as it afforded good advice about how the business operated and how to approach agents and publishers.

The extent to which social media was used by publishers to determine commissioning decisions was delimited by the editor's sense of judgement, even in the largest of conglomerates with access to relatively sophisticated digital tools. One editor noted, 'we've got consumer insight software packages here where it will [...] track how people are being spoken about on social media [...] and] measure social media popularity.' The editor went on to comment that, 'it still has to be your instinct', and that using social media popularity as an indicator was a way of 'testing your instincts', rather than driving commissioning decisions.

The rise of self-publishing, while enabling authors to side-step the gatekeeping processes of traditional publishers, also creates a potential 'digital slush pile' for commissioning editors.³⁸ Such platforms can enable editors in traditional publishing companies to see which authors receive the most positive feedback from self-publishing communities, if they choose to use them – although the majority of my interviewees did not. For one small independent publisher who had taken on an author who was previously self-published with Amazon, it was a testing ground, albeit one they did not actively seek (the author submitted directly to the publisher). A conglomerate editor, whose colleague had very successfully republished a book which had been a self-published Kindle number one bestseller, commented that her team did look at the self-published charts. The books they were considering had already proved themselves by charting, and the editors then might 'try to maybe tempt those authors to come over to us', building a publishing model whereby self-publishing can feed into, and interact with, traditional publishing companies. Self-publishing operates as a digital finding tool for some editors, then, although the tool tends to be most effective in the more commercial and mass-market genres. The same conglomerate editor commented that the more substantial lessons mainstream publishers can draw from self-publishing was in the development and demise of trends, and in how self-published authors use metadata, work with price flexing, and enable social media.

Beyond these comments on attempting to learn from patterns within self-publishing and on social media, however, none of the editors that I interviewed made reference to any aspect of machine-learning or algorithmic processes in commissioning, either within their current or potential practices. Publishing is ‘largely quite an old-fashioned industry’, as one conglomerate editor told me, where an investment in an individual’s taste, or team decision-making processes, still largely pertains. One editor, although able to analyse her commissioning decisions when probed, nonetheless described her editorial selection as ‘an emotional thing’. The publishers I spoke to, whether working in large or small companies, were keen to assert the role of the individual in editorial selection and, , the primacy of taste-making, even if they problematised it. The ‘old-fashioned’ nature of publishing angered one interviewee, however, an editor in a mid-sized company. She saw the ‘retrenchment’ of publishers from digital experimentation as an ‘intergenerational’ risk. She argued instead for ‘how we fundamentally make storytelling relevant’ across a variety of demographics (notably gender, as well as age).

Such criticism from within the industry links back to the faint praise Archer and Jockers offer of the ‘good job’ literary agents and editors make of ‘putting books in front of consumers’. It could be argued that many of my interview respondents demonstrated a complacency in their retrenchment from digital tools and experimentation. Moreover, the ‘intergenerational’ risk represented by such a turn away from digital technologies flags up a range of other demographic risks: that publishing is not sufficiently producing for and catering to, for example, emerging readers, younger men, and BAME communities. Editorial commissioning’s core gatekeeping function has systemically filtered publication along prejudicial lines, as scholarship on black and feminist publishing has revealed.³⁹ Indeed, Archer and Jockers argue that their author-blind computational reading approach might enable diversity in publishing by removing the conscious or unconscious biases of the human editor and publishing company, potentially giving those individuals and communities without contacts and with different demographic identities access to the publishing industry.⁴⁰ This is a challenge that mainstream publishing and its processes of editorial selection has repeatedly failed. Is now the time, then, for commissioning decisions to be socio-politically altered by digital technologies, while simultaneously addressing publishing’s over long-lived ‘diversity deficit’?⁴¹

Archer and Jockers' exploration of computer modelling of bestsellers makes an intervention which is innately *textual*, however. As they argue about bestselling titles, 'there had to be something beyond the marketing, something about those particular words on those particular pages.'⁴² Their modelling therefore discounts who the author is, or what their following might be, the marketing frame, or broader sociological contexts within which the book is published, or within which we would wish it to be published. The 'machine imitating editor', as Archer and Jockers have it, is decontextualised, operating outside of political, sociological and cultural contexts, and reliant on patterns derived from the texts of pre-existent bestsellers. As my own scholarship operates within the materially-focused paradigm of the history of the book – with the central argument of my *Marketing Literature* being that marketing is a form of representation which radically affects the market placement and reception of books – such claims are a provocation, potentially as 'disruptive; mind-bending' for scholarship as Archer and Jockers argue they will be to publishing practice.⁴³ The provocation to traditional, 'legacy' publishers is already deeply felt - in the increasing corporatisation and market-orientation brought to publishers through successive rounds of conglomeration from the 1970s onwards; in already well-established forms of data-driven decision-making informed by Nielson Bookscan's sales figures from the early 2000s; and in the digital disruptions and disintermediations referred to at the beginning of this article.⁴⁴ It is possible that the predominantly unchanging practices described by my interviewees and – moreover – the discursive tendencies which keep them to the fore, is a form of resistance to both mass-market and data-driven practices, with their emphasis on the individual, on the professionalised act of reading, and on company reading cultures. The extreme vision of technology (or rather technology companies, and primarily Amazon) taking over the world of books finds one mode of response in upholding traditional selection models, and rejecting a seemingly 'rational, automated decision-making' based on technological information.⁴⁵

And yet between the poles of computational enchantment and digital scepticism, between an over-evangelism for technology or a retrenchment into traditional modes, how might we interpret, and indeed shape, contemporary publishing practice? A more critically-informed response to the question of post-digital editorial selection might instead lie in the placement of the curatorial within 'algorithmic culture', in Ted Striphas' formulation.⁴⁶ Part of this process might insist on the importance of the human voice, either within qualitative research such as this, which takes in mid-level data via interviews; or as a broader set of discursive practices and cultural constructs, including the centrality of human curators in selecting and

promoting books, and (in commercial terms) adding value and developing brand. Such a call might simultaneously recognise the faults inherent in human gatekeeping (including its repeated exclusion of particular demographics), but also reinsert a critical understanding of where data-driven, algorithmic culture might be taking publishing, and which aspects of traditional practice we might want to retain along the way.

Notes

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- ¹ Jodie Archer and Matthew L. Jockers, *The Bestseller Code* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), 19.
- ² *Ibid.*, 6, 12.
- ³ See Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013) and Simone Murray, ‘Charting the Digital Literary Sphere’, *Contemporary Literature* 56: 2 (2015), 311-39, 318.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ⁶ Philippe Vasset, *ScriptGenerator* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2004; translated by Jane Metter, originally published in France in 2003).
- ⁷ Murray, ‘Charting the Digital Literary Sphere’, 8.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 9, 11.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ¹⁰ Padmini Ray Murray and Claire Squires, ‘The Digital Publishing Communications Circuit’, *Book 2.0*, 3:1 (2013), 3-23.
- ¹¹ These changes are chronicled in my *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and by John B Thompson in *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).
- ¹² Florian Cramer, ‘What is Post-Digital?’, *APRJA: Post Digital Research* 3:1 (2014), <http://www.aprja.net/?p=1318>, accessed 20.9.16
- ¹³ Angus Phillips, *Turning the Page: The Evolution of the Book* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p.xiii.
- ¹⁴ Alison Flood, ‘Ebook sales falling for the first time, finds new report’, *Guardian* 3 February 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/03/ebook-sales-falling-for-the-first-time-finds-new-report> accessed 20 September 2016.
- ¹⁵ Tom Tivnan, ‘E-book sales abate for Big Five’, *The Bookseller* 29 January 2016, <http://www.thebookseller.com/blogs/e-book-sales-abate-big-five-321245>, accessed 20 September 2016.
- ¹⁶ Simon Jenkins, ‘Books are Back. Only the Technodazzled Thought They Would Go Away’, *Guardian* 13 May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/may/13/books-ebook-publishers-paper>, accessed 13 May 2016.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*.

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- ¹⁸ Flood, 'Ebook Sales'. The value %s are likely to be more stratified, given the typical cost differential between self-published and the Big 5's ebooks.
- ¹⁹ See Ray Murray and Squires, 'Digital Publishing'.
- ²⁰ See Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, 'The Return of the Social Author: Negotiating Authority and Influence on Wattpad', *Convergence* (16 June 2016) 1-20.
- ²¹ Ted Striphas, *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
- ²² Gail Rebuck, 'The Curious Incident of the Book in the Digital Age', London Book Fair's Quantum Conference, 11 April 2016, <https://publishingperspectives.com/2016/04/gail-rebuck-book-digital-age-london-book-fair/>, accessed 20 September 2016.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Kelvin Smith, *The Publishing Business: From P-books to E-books* (Lausanne: AVA Publishing, 2012), 96.
- ²⁵ Gill Davies, *Book Commissioning and Acquisition* (London: Routledge, 1995) 13, 34.
- ²⁶ Susan Greenberg, *Editors Talk About Editing: Insights for Readers, Writers and Publishers* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015), 4.
- ²⁷ Roberto Calasso, *The Art of the Publisher* (London: Penguin Books, 2015; translated by Richard Dixon, originally published in Italy in 2013), 121.
- ²⁸ Murray, 'Charting the Digital Literary Sphere', 332.
- ²⁹ Michael Bhaskar, *Curation: The Power of Selection in a World of Excess* (London: Piatkus, 2016), 9.
- ³⁰ Bhaskar, *Curation*, 56.
- ³¹ Bhaskar, *Curation*, 114, 117.
- ³² Ibid, 108.
- ³³ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984; translated by Richard Nice, originally published in France in 1979).
- ³⁴ Other scholars operating in this vein not already referenced elsewhere in this article include Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo's *Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Beth Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); and the edited volume from Ann Steiner, Sara Kärrholm, and Jon Helgason, eds., *Hype: Bestsellers and Literary Cultures* (Nordic Academic Press, 2014).
- ³⁵ John Frow, 'On Midlevel Concepts', *New Literary History* 41: 2 (2010) 237-252, 248.
- ³⁶ This editor (as several of the others), used the 'generic-you' to talk about herself in interview. See Ariana Orvell, Ethan Kross, and Susan A. Gelman, 'How "You" Makes Meaning', *Science* 335:6631 (24 March 2017), 1299-1302, for research into the 'generic-you'.
- ³⁷ Juliet Gardiner, 'Recuperating the Author: Consuming Fictions of the 1990s' *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 94:2 (2000), 255-74.
- ³⁸ See Ray Murray and Squires.
- ³⁹ See, for example, Simone Murray *Mixed Media: Feminist Presses and Publishing Practice* (London: Pluto Press, 2004); John K Young, *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature* (Jackson: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Claire Squires, 'Too Much Rushdie, Not Enough Romance? The UK Publishing Industry and BME (Black Minority Ethnic Readership)', in Bethan Benwell, James Procter, and Gemma Robinson, eds., *Postcolonial Audiences: Readers, Viewers and Reception* (London: Routledge, 2012), 99-111; and Anamik Saha, 'The Rationalizing/Racializing Logic of Capital in Cultural Production', *Media Industries* 3:1 (2016), 1-16.
- ⁴⁰ Archer and Jockers, pp.13-14.

⁴¹ See Claire Squires, 'Publishing's Diversity Deficit', *CAMEo Cuts #2* (Leicester: CAMEo Research Institute for Cultural and Media Economies, 2017).

⁴² Archer and Jockers, p.17

⁴³ Archer and Jockers, p.8.

⁴⁴ See Squires, *Marketing Literature*; and C Clayton Childress, 'Decision-Making, Market Logic and the Rating Mindset: Negotiating BookScan in the Field of US Trade Publishing', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15:5 (2012), 604-620.

⁴⁵ See Mark Davis, 'E-Books in the Global Information Economy', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18: 4-5 (2015), 514-529. Davis' critique of the global ebook market, and (in particular) Amazon's concomitant 'commodification of reading' (p.522), delineates the lines of argument against data-driven publishing.

⁴⁶ Ted Striphas, 'Algorithmic Culture', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18: 4-5 (2015), 395-412.