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Filtering, Framing, Amplifying: The Core of Publishing Now and Then

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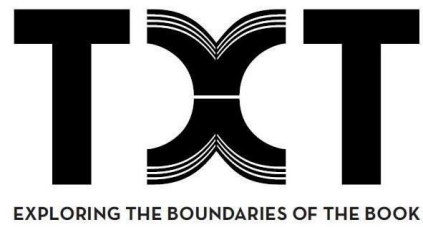
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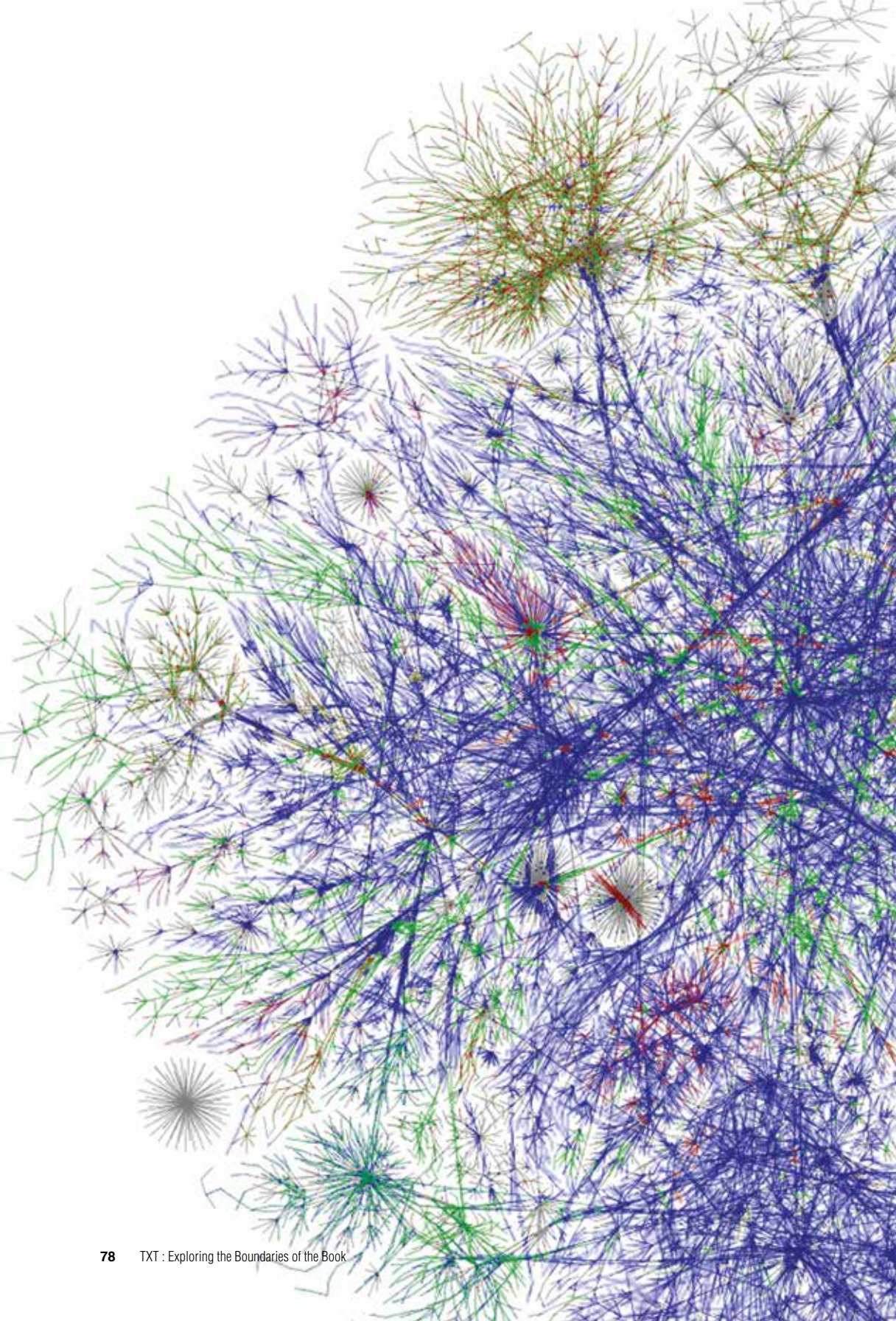
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Filtering, Framing, Amplifying

The Core of Publishing Now and Then

By Michael Bhaskar

Author of *The Content Machine* and Digital Publishing Director
at Profile Books and Serpent's Tail.

In *The Content Machine* I outlined a theory of publishing; a set of actions which over history have defined this diverse, extraordinary, often bizarre but always essential activity. Since then I have not stopped thinking about how these three shape my own practice as a publisher; I still believe that this is what, when all is said and done, we do. In the book I spent considerable time arguing that over time although this trinity of publishing has changed, they stayed constant. What precisely constitutes amplification is always changing, what remains is the idea of amplification itself. I want to boil down the ideas in the book, so show how this works by looking at each now—in the post-digital age—and then—in the print era from Gutenberg to the 1990s.

Filtering

Then: In a print world scarcity was a constant. In the early days of printing and publishing all aspects of the process would have been difficult, rare and extremely expensive. Paper and ink, for instance, were both difficult to get hold of. Texts were not in huge abundance either, the literate population being small. Although productivity increased and all aspects of this changed a great deal, the limitations and costs of the physical remained. This meant publishers were about active choosing—in a world of limits, publishers chose what to make happen. Publishers filtered content in an active way to make the content a reality.

Now: Content on the Internet is almost limitless. Thanks to its generative and disseminative power (not least through piracy) the web has made content ubiquitous and abundant. This changes the filtering role of publishers, making it more properly filtering or curating. Publishers now increasingly pick content from an existing sea, their impri-

matur, the fact of their choice not making the content happen as such, but making it noteworthy. This curatorial shift is, I believe, part of a wider shift in the economy to curation, selecting and arranging rather than producing.

Framing

My concept of framing content has two components: the distribution mechanism (the book, the CD, the file) and the surrounding set of preconceptions, both of which overlap to some extent.

Then: The distributional aspect of framing, e.g. the print book, was the most important. Sure print books were about design and presentation, status, wealth and culture, but it was the fact they could convey information that was key to the frames. Frame as distribution mechanism meant a function of the publisher was the ability to facilitate this distribution. Bluntly, publishers meant frames that were mechanisms to distribute. Indeed right up until the 1980s this was still the near exclusive preserve of publishers of one kind or another who had a quasi-monopoly on framing texts.

Now: The frame as distribution system has been exploded. New frames—code, servers, screens—are still distributional, but because they are so democratic, distribution doesn't mean so much. Instead the work of framing here shifts to subjective aspects. The brand of the publisher, the buzz around a book, the design signals, the messaging—all of these elements of the frame, the subjective parts that were always there, have, thanks to the framing power of the Internet, come to the fore. In practice this means publishers should rethink their framing. They are no longer

just makers of books—they must be framers of content in the widest possible sense.

Amplification

Amplification is at the heart of publishing and cuts through the many messy definitions and debates of what publishing is. Amplification is also simple: ensuring that a work is more widely encountered than without the amplifying act. That's it; that's publishing.

Then: In a world of print scarcity simply to print a book was a de facto amplification. As this situation alleviated throughout the long boom since the turn of the nineteenth century, amplification became about exposure—principally by getting

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reviews and above all by securing slots in bookshops. Ownership of this channel was a publisher monopoly on content amplification. In all of them however, amplification is about using scarcity—of print matter, of review and retail space, to funnel readers towards your content and so amplify it.

Now: Inventory is, on Amazon and the web more widely, unlimited. Simply having your book available on Amazon no longer qualifies as amplification if no one is looking at it. As with framing, the amplificatory burden has shifted: amplification is not about making a work available,

it is now about making it known. Attention is the resource at a premium; claiming that attention for your book the main goal of amplification. This explains the rise and rise of publicity and marketing as forces in publishing as they, more than anything, do the work of amplification today.

So publishing is the same yet different. We shouldn't be surprised as this has always been the way. Publishing has been reinventing itself from medieval scriptoria, through the earliest printers in Germany, to the great publishers of Renaissance Venice and Antwerp like Manutius and Plantin, to those who invented intellectual property in seventeenth century England, to cultural powerbrokers, to the pioneers of steam printing like the Harper and

Chamber brothers, to the great conglomerates of the 1980s and 1990s that horizontally integrated into modern and global corporations.

Digital technology as the above shows is the greatest single change to happen to publishing for hundreds of years. It changes everything core about publishing. Yet publishing, a mutable, flexible and essential activity of filtering, framing and amplifying content, remains. ■

Michael Bhaskar is Digital Publishing Director at Profile Books and the author of a book about publishing: The Content Machine. He can be found on Twitter @michaelbhaskar

