

Books, Digital Technology, and the Market – Issues and Implications of Mapping the Contemporary Book Trade

The contemporary book trade proposes challenges to the field of book studies. In many ways it resembles nothing we have seen before, yet the theories and methods at hand for analysing structures and changes mainly come out of book history or sociology of the text. An historical perspective is often useful when applied to publishing, distribution and reading, however, there are limitations as new questions have arose.

In 2009 I published a textbook on Swedish and international contemporary book trade. In describing current changes and doing research for both historical and present facts I encountered methodological and theoretical difficulties. In the proposed paper I intend to discuss the issues that came up as I dealt with authors, publishers, booksellers, online communities, legislation, cultural politics, etc.

Two main areas will be discussed. The first relates to the uses of other disciplines in understanding book trade. Book history is a multidisciplinary field and as such opens up for theories and methods not only from literary studies and history, but also from for example economic theory, law, sociology, and European anthropology. However, cross-use of theories is difficult as these can easily be applied in a simplifying manner. For the individual researcher it is hardly possible to master several disciplines and the paper will propose possible ways to approach the multidisciplinary challenge in book studies.

The second main issue to be addressed relates to digital technology and new media for transmission and dissemination of texts. The main object in book history has always, of course, been the book. But when the book is challenged by other publishing formats how are we to limit and define the field? Mp3-files, online hyperworks, Google Books, audiobooks, etc. have questioned the definition of the material and the paper will discuss some of the implications of the digital development.