

## 1 Introduction

In 1943, the cartoonist Helen E. Hokinson (1893–1949),<sup>1</sup> known for her anthropological eye for society and culture, published a vignette about the Book-of-the-Month Club (BOMC) in the *New Yorker* magazine. One of Hokinson’s famous ladies, with their plump form, small feet and friendly faces, says to her hometown librarian, “I’m afraid this is goodbye, Miss MacDonald. I’m joining the Book-of-the-Month Club.”<sup>2</sup> In this cartoon, a subscription to a book sales club relieves the reader of the need for recommendations from and conversations with the librarian (many of whom were portrayed by Hokinson over the years) and of the necessity to use the library infrastructure. Instead, the reader now waits at home for the monthly delivery – looking forward to the missive from the book club, which will not only include a book but also an extensive review by a member of the club’s editorial board – an idea which the *New York Times* touted “Harry Scherman’s best SOFT-SELL IDEA” (see also Section 3).<sup>3</sup> In an ironic twist, the cartoon was used in BOMC ads once a year.<sup>4</sup>

In 1944, Hokinson’s protagonist from the 1943 cartoon is sitting on her couch, decked out in heels and pearls, with a friend, who is equally well groomed. She has waited patiently for her Book-of-the-Month to arrive and is now opening her parcel. Anachronistically speaking, she is “unboxing”<sup>5</sup> her Book-of-the-Month. As she unboxes the book, she says, “What I like

<sup>1</sup> R. C. Harvey, “Helen E. Hokinson,” *The Comics Journal* (July 22, 2013), [www.tcj.com/helen-e-hokinson/](http://www.tcj.com/helen-e-hokinson/).

<sup>2</sup> H. E. Hokinson, “I’m afraid this is goodbye” [cartoon], *New Yorker*, XIX (Nov. 13, 1943), 39, 105.

<sup>3</sup> W. Glaberson, “The Book Clubs, Chapter 2,” *New York Times* (July 12, 1987), 153.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. E. Fitzgerald, *A Nickel an Inch. A Memoir* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), p. 267.

<sup>5</sup> *Urban Dictionary* definition: “The Internet trend of showing photos or video from the unpacking of a retail box of some desirable product, such as the latest laptop or portable music player.” 2Go0D, “Unboxing” in *Urban Dictionary* (Feb. 1, 2008), [www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=unboxing](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=unboxing). For more detail, cf. R. Noorda, “The Element of Surprise: A Study of Children’s Book Subscription Boxes in the USA,” *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 35 (2019) 2, 223–35, 227–8.

about the Book-of-the-Month Club is the suspense.<sup>6</sup> Since the cartoon is a stand-alone vignette, we are left to wonder: Does she like the suspense of not knowing which book will be sent to her? Or does she think the books themselves are filled with suspense? Or is it a combination of the two: the anticipation and the reading pleasure?

These two cartoons emphasize a number of issues surrounding book sales clubs that make them so relevant to book and publishing historians, historians of reading and literature, and cultural sociologists – to name a few of the fields that can profit from a deeper understanding of the workings and intricacies of book sales clubs in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Book sales clubs, also referred to as publisher book clubs, offer an interesting vantage point from which to observe the book trade, since they are a well-established and long-standing distribution channel and have evolved over time to adapt to different market requirements. As institutions within the literary marketplace, they contribute to the negotiation of values and practices associated with reading. In addition, their history (mergers, closures, restructuring, relaunches, etc.) can help us understand the challenges the book industry is facing more generally.

This Element will offer a comprehensive analysis of the significance of book clubs in relation to the book industry, answering overarching questions about the structures, members, and appeal of the book club. Existing studies tend to focus on the local or national context. However, already in 1938, at a meeting of English P.E.N., participants discussed the effects of book clubs as a “development which was not restricted by national boundaries.”<sup>7</sup> Their observations were true: book clubs are central to the global history of the book, not least through their significance for the foundation and spread of international media conglomerates. I will argue that patterns in the history of book clubs are similar across national boundaries and markets and show how the book club business was intertwined internationally. Given the limits of the Element format, I will mainly focus on examples from the British, German, and US book industries. This

<sup>6</sup> H. E. Hokinson, “What I like about the Book-of-the-Month Club . . .” [cartoon], *New Yorker*, XX (July 29, 1944) 24, 57. Underline in the original.

<sup>7</sup> See also “Book Societies and Effect on Shops,” *Times* (Jan. 5, 1938), 12.

choice was motivated by source availability and by the fact that these three nations' book industries have consistently been three of the most active and profitable worldwide throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries.<sup>8</sup> Whenever possible, I will also draw on other book industry data to illustrate international trends and transnational similarities. When quotes are translated into English, the translations are my own.

Section 2 will outline the economics of the book club distribution model in relation to different book industry players. It will also discuss the cultural impact of book clubs and the theoretical frameworks for analysis and comparison of book clubs. Section 2 will conclude with the introduction of a model (the four Cs) to further structure our understanding of book clubs.

Then, Section 3 will focus on book clubs in the twentieth century. We will see which companies shaped our understanding of the clubs – and how they have contributed to the international publishing landscape through their driving role in the foundation and expansion of (inter-)national multimedia conglomerates such as Bertelsmann and Holtzbrinck. We will also consider how the book clubs reacted to fundamental changes in the book industry landscape such as the introduction of big box bookstores and bookstore chains and the rise of internet bookselling. We will explore forms of membership and see how members' magazines or newsletters and other corporate publishing outputs contribute(d) to the establishment of a certain image for each individual publisher book club. In addition, the research points toward the role book design and – more broadly speaking – paratexts<sup>9</sup> and marketing of the book as a collectible object play(ed) in the heyday of the book clubs and beyond. Section 4 will consider chances and challenges for book clubs today in the face of an increasingly digital literary

<sup>8</sup> The WIPO-IPA report on *The Global Publishing Industry in 2016* ranked the United States first for total revenue from sales and licensing for the retail sector, Germany third, and the UK fifth. Cf. WIPO/IPA, *The Global Publishing Industry in 2016*, [Geneva] 2018. [www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/wipo\\_ipa\\_pa\\_pilotsurvey\\_2016.pdf](http://www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/wipo_ipa_pa_pilotsurvey_2016.pdf), p. 7 (table 1).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. G. Genette, *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

sphere,<sup>10</sup> drawing on best practice examples that are still active today. Section 5 will offer some conclusions and an outlook.

A multi-method approach was employed to grasp the complex history and present state of the book club. This Element builds on countless individual histories of book clubs. Archival research and interviews supplemented the existing studies. The digital archives of the *New York Times* and the *London Times* have proven to be a treasure trove for insights on the history of the book club business in the Anglophone world and beyond. Other sources for this study included but were not limited to archival materials from Mainzer Verlagsarchiv and the Special Collections at Universiteit van Amsterdam; the online catalogs of the British Library, Deutsche Nationalbibliothek and the Library of Congress; the digital archives of *LIFE*, *New Yorker*, *Spiegel* and *Zeit*; selected club members' magazines available to the author at time of writing; and a small set of semi-structured interviews<sup>11</sup> with employees and former employees of German book clubs.

## 2 Book Clubs: Definition and Basic Structures

When Joseph W. Kappel wrote about the influence of club selections on the evaluation of books in 1948, he began by “describ[ing] briefly how book clubs operate” and quickly admitted that this “is by no means a simple task.”<sup>12</sup> This section will attempt to sketch out the basics of book clubs. After a brief disambiguation of the term “book club” and observations on the inconspicuousness of book clubs in book historical models and research, Section 2.1 will discuss the main types of book clubs. Section 2.2 will then consider the basic economic ideas that drive publisher book clubs, followed by Section 2.3, which will foreground the cultural impact of the clubs.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. S. Murray, “Charting the Digital Literary Sphere,” *Contemporary Literature*, 56 (2015), 2, 311–39.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. C. Hopf, “Qualitative Interviews – ein Überblick” in U. Flick, et al. (eds.), *Qualitative Forschung. Ein Handbuch*, 8th edn. (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2010), pp. 349–60.

<sup>12</sup> J. W. Kappel, “Book Clubs and Evaluations of Books,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12 (1948), 2, 243–52, 244.

It is first useful to disambiguate the term “book club.” While other languages (such as Dutch, French and German) differentiate between book discussion clubs (Dutch: *leesclub*, *leeskring*; French: *club de lecture*, *cercle de lecture*; German: *Lesekreis*, *Literaturkreis*), bibliophile book clubs (Dutch: *bibliofielclub*; French: *société bibliophile*, *société des bibliophiles*; German: *Bibliophilenverein*, *Bibliophilengesellschaft*) and book sales clubs (Dutch: *boekenclub*; French: *club de livres*; German: *Buchgemeinschaft*), the English term “book clubs” can lead to misinterpretations.<sup>13</sup> There are at least four established meanings of the term from an Anglophone point of view, some of which are used in overlapping ways:

1. Firstly, and most importantly for our context here, the term “book clubs” can be used to denote “book-distribution institutions”<sup>14</sup> that offer(ed) an alternative to traditional book buying in bricks-and-mortar bookstores. These commercial organizations worked as distributors if they bought in published books and resold them below retail price. They could also work as publisher-distributors if they (a) bought in licenses for published books and published their own, rebadged editions or (b) published their own list of original editions or new, special editions of already published material.

The book clubs sold their products via a subscription model (club membership), often at a substantial discount, which is why they are sometimes known as discount book clubs. Other terms used are book sales clubs, commercial book clubs, direct-to-consumer book clubs, publisher book clubs or sometimes even publishing book clubs.

Unless otherwise stated, in this Element, “book club” will refer to the first meaning detailed here. These other meanings are also in use:

2. Book clubs, also known as book discussion clubs, reading groups, book groups or literature circles, include ‘small, peer-led discussion groups

<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to C. Krömer (Le Mans) and L. Kuitert (Amsterdam) for assistance in verifying translations of these terms.

<sup>14</sup> J. Harker, *America the Middlebrow. Women’s Novels, Progressivism, and Middlebrow Authorship between the Wars* (Amherst/Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), p. 16.

whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. . . . Each group follows a reading and meeting schedule, holding periodic discussions on the way through the book.”<sup>15</sup> Today, this is the most common use of the term.<sup>16</sup> These book discussion clubs have received much scholarly<sup>17</sup> and media attention – even before, but especially after, TV celebrity Oprah Winfrey founded Oprah’s Book Club.<sup>18</sup>

3. Sometimes the term “book club” describes bibliophile societies such as the Caxton Club in Chicago or the Book Club of California, which can be “bodies formed for the printing of works which would not, because of their specialized nature, be published as commercial ventures.”<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere, the term “book collectors clubs”<sup>20</sup> is employed.
4. In her oft-quoted thesis *Fiction and the Reading Public*, Q. D. Leavis uses the term “book-club” when referring to subscription library structures and/or literary societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, directly quoting from nineteenth-century sources about a “Country Book-Club.”<sup>21</sup> In clubs and societies such as these, members had access to libraries, that is, for borrowing books or for reading them on club premises. Leavis also writes in an explicitly derogatory way about the

<sup>15</sup> H. Daniels, *Literature Circle: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*, 2nd edn. (Portsmouth, NH: Stenhouse Publishers, 2002), p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. G. Clark and A. Phillips, *Inside Book Publishing*, 5th edn. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 296.

<sup>17</sup> For more context, cf. E. Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> For more context, cf. for instance chap. 4 in T. Striplas, *The Late Age of Print. Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) or C. K. Farr, *Reading Oprah* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> G. A. Glaister, *Encyclopedia of the Book*, 2nd edn. (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 1996), p. 62.

<sup>20</sup> S. E. Berger, *The Dictionary of the Book. A Glossary for Book Collectors, Booksellers, Librarians, and Others* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 111, 123–5.

first modern book sales club in Britain, the Book Society (established in 1929 in the UK, discontinued in 1969) but does not employ the term “club” in this context.<sup>22</sup>

Besides the ambiguity of the term “book club,” there is an additional challenge when working with book industry data. Some studies conflate book clubs as a sales channel with “direct sales” and “mail order”; in other studies, the difference between “direct sales,” “mail order” and “book clubs” is pronounced. This affects the comparability of the statistics, though the conflation of the categories bears witness to the manifold activities of the clubs, which sold products to their members door-to-door, through mail-order catalogs, book club buses, shop-in-shop models, or dedicated club bookstores and later the internet.

Book clubs as book-distribution institutions have a long and varied (and international) history. However, book-distribution institutions seem to suffer from academic neglect. Madeleine B. Stern observed, “In the card and directory catalog of the New York Public Library, there is nothing that stands between the listings BOOKS-DISINFECTION and BOOKS-DUMMIES. The . . . entries[] BOOKS-DISSEMINATION and BOOKS-DISTRIBUTION are conspicuous by their absence.”<sup>23</sup> Monika Estermann argues similarly, emphasizing that scholarly examinations of book distributors are extremely rare compared to publishing and publishers’ histories or corporate histories and commemorative volumes for publishers.<sup>24</sup> While the journal *Book History* has published a number of articles on the state of the

<sup>22</sup> Cf. N. Wilson, “Middlemen, Middlebrow, Broadbrow,” in C. Ferrall and D. McNeill (eds.), *British Literature in Transition, 1920–1940: Futility and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 315–30 (passim).

<sup>23</sup> M. B. Stern, “Dissemination of Popular Books in the Midwest and Far West during the Nineteenth Century,” in M. Hackenberg (ed.), *Getting the Books Out. Papers of the Chicago Conference on the Book in 19th-Century America* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2005), pp. 76–97, 76.

<sup>24</sup> M. Estermann, “Buchhandel, Buchhandelsgeschichte und Verlagsgeschichtsschreibung vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart,” in U. Rautenberg (ed.), *Buchwissenschaft in Deutschland* (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter Saur, 2013), pp. 257–320, 304.

discipline for a variety of topics (reading, online reading, textbooks, history of archives, etc.), questions of bookselling and distribution have not been highlighted in this way. Distributors are certainly underrepresented in book trade and publishing history studies, although they figure as equally important actors in the standard book historical models we refer to, such as Darnton's communications circuit (1982) or Adams/Barker's "New Model for the Study of the Book" (1993).<sup>25</sup> The imbalance has various reasons. As precarious as their situation may be, publishers' archives are better preserved and more easily available than sources relating to distributors and distribution.<sup>26</sup> However, there has recently been a welcome surge in interest in bookselling and distribution questions, and this seems to be a growing area.<sup>27</sup>

Book clubs as a specific entity are all but missing from the models we rely on in the first instance as book historians: simply put, Darnton's observations take their starting point in examples from the eighteenth century, meaning an inclusion of the twentieth-century book club model would have been more than anachronistic. While he could have included subscription, he does not, though he does include clubs as an option for readers, giving early literary circles and societies a nod. In general, however, the one-way circuitry of the model does not allow for direct sales methods, because these would have to cross through the middle of the circuit and connect publisher and reader (buyer) directly. While Adams and Barker omit book clubs in their model, the omission goes hand in hand with a more general focus on structures, and less on actors and institutions. In the

<sup>25</sup> R. Darnton, "What Is the History of Books?" *Daedalus*, 111 (1982), 3, 65–83; T. Adams/N. Barker, "A New Model for the Study of the Book," in D. Finkelstein and A. McCleery (eds.), *The Book History Reader*, 2nd edn. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 47–65.

<sup>26</sup> Regarding the availability of publisher archives, cf. for instance D. Gastell, "Verlagsgeschichtsschreibung ohne Verlagsarchiv," in C. Norrick and U. Schneider (eds.), *Verlagsgeschichtsschreibung. Modelle und Archivfunde* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), pp. 46–59.

<sup>27</sup> As evidenced by discussions at SHARP 2019, e.g., during Panel 3.6. Some of these discussions were continued on the conference hashtag #sharp19.



Adams/Barker model, book clubs could be categorized as belonging to either “publication,” “manufacture” or “distribution,” since the structures and models can fulfill any of those three category briefs. We can assume that the two bibliographers would agree, since they understood their reaction to Darnton’s model as a way to map relationships between organizations and processes, rather than static positions of actors in a circuit. Finally, the late-twentieth-century print publishing communications circuit developed by Padmini Ray Murray and Claire Squires also omits book clubs, though they could have possibly been included in their category “Wholesalers and Distributors.” In contrast, Ray Murray and Squires name “subscriber” as a possible role for twenty-first-century readers in their “Digital Publishing Communications Circuit.”<sup>28</sup>

### 2.1 *Book Club Basics*

When dealing with books, which are simultaneously commodities and cultural objects, it can be difficult to divorce the economic from the cultural perspective. The two perspectives are intertwined. German-language scholars and book industry specialists alike use the term “double character of the book” to denote this interconnection.<sup>29</sup> This double character applies to book clubs, too. The different options to break down book sales clubs into subcategories lean to either the cultural or the economic perspective.

If we favor a cultural perspective, we can categorize book clubs according to their lists. We can consider the list through distant reading and statistical analysis of the catalog. On the one hand, we could compare depth – availability of options in a particular field/genre. On the other hand, we could compare breadth – availability of diverse options covering a spectrum of fields/genres. A cultural-leaning focus could look at the

<sup>28</sup> P. Ray Murray and C. Squires, “The Digital Publishing Communications Circuit,” *Book 2.0*, 3 (2013), 1, 3–23.

<sup>29</sup> “Doppelcharakter des Buches.” Cf., e.g., H. Volpers, “Der internationale Buchmarkt,” in J.-F. Leonhard, et al. (eds.), *Medienwissenschaft: Ein Handbuch zur Entwicklung der Medien und Kommunikationsformen. 3. Teilband* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2002), pp. 2649–60, 2649.

materiality of the book club editions and discuss their status as cultural signifiers (cf. Section 2.4).

If we lean towards the economic perspective, we can categorize book clubs by their corporate status. Just as John B. Thompson suggests for publishers in his monograph *Merchants of Culture*, we can situate the different companies on a continuum, from independent to corporate ownership.<sup>30</sup> As we will see, many clubs started out independently and were taken over by the big conglomerate players like Doubleday, Time Warner or Bertelsmann. Others were founded as part of conglomerate growth strategies.

We can also classify book clubs by their point of sale, that is, whether they sell via mail-order catalog, employing door-to-door salespeople, in dedicated bricks-and-mortar book club retail sites or in shop-in-shop retail sites. As will be described in the historical overview, many clubs chose to offer their members a combination of these sales strategies to maximize reach and visibility, as well as for brand building and recruitment.

According to Weissbach, however, all of these categories – whether informed by a cultural or economic perspective – are not specific to book clubs.<sup>31</sup> The categories are also applicable to any publisher. Weissbach argues that we can differentiate clubs in the most straightforward way by looking at the membership requirements and the relationship between the consumers and the club. Here, Weissbach distinguishes between clubs with a direct subscription of specific titles of a series or collection and clubs with a membership fee structure.

For Germany, examples of the former are the Bibliothek der Unterhaltung und des Wissens or Welt im Buch. These clubs with a direct subscription of specific titles were especially prevalent in the early history of the clubs, before World War II. However, it became clear that to retain members, clubs needed to offer selection options and more flexibility.

<sup>30</sup> J. B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture. The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd edn. (New York: Plume, 2012), p. 129.

<sup>31</sup> F. Weissbach, “Buchgemeinschaften als Vertriebsform im Buchhandel,” in *Buchgemeinschaften in Deutschland* (Hamburg: Verlag für Buchmarkt-Forschung, 1969), pp. 17–101, 54.