

Introduction: The Three-Body Problem

Way back in the previous century, on a clear summer night in the early 1970s, a young hitchhiker was resting in a field near Innsbruck in Austria, gazing at the stars and dreaming of galactic travel. An idea formed in his head and a few years later Douglas Adams submitted a draft to the BBC for a radio play entitled *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (HG2G). BBC Radio 4 broadcast the first episode on 8 March 1978, followed by one episode a week until 12 April (the final two episodes were written with John Lloyd). Due to its success, in the next two decades followed another radio series, a vinyl album, a TV series, a computer game, comic books, a film, and the trilogy of novels (in five parts) that were also published as audiobooks. Adams reworked the narrative each time the story went through a media transformation so that in the end there are almost as many versions of the story as there are formats in which it appeared.

In the 1970s and 1980s the ability to access the range of HG2G products was limited by geographic and temporal constraints and by the accessibility of the media in which the content appeared. To listen to the radio show or TV series, one had to live in the UK and tune in at a specific time and day when the series aired. To play the video game, one had to own the video game console and have access to a store where games were sold. Similarly, HG2G vinyl albums and books were sold in the UK, the USA, and Canada and in some better-stocked stores in continental Europe – and that was it.

One of the authors of this book, who back then lived quite close to the field where Douglas Adams was looking at the stars that night (just on the other side of the Alps, on the Communist side of the then European divide), happened to find the first book in the HG2G series in the early 1980s whilst browsing in a bookshop in Camden Town in London. He found himself there by coincidence when he was hitchhiking around Europe for the summer holidays, spending nights in parks and cheap hostels, and ended up in London because he got a lift there. For the majority of book readers, such a chance encounter in a bookstore was the only way to access and find interesting books.

Fifty years later Douglas Adams would be called a multiplatform storyteller or cross-media author. As in a science fiction novel, all the media of

his life – cinema, television, radio, LP, cassette, book, typewriter, computer, CD-ROM, and comic – were miraculously squeezed into a device smaller than a paperback called a smartphone. This made all his works, in a wide variety of formats and categories, accessible to any smartphone user with internet access. The co-author of this study, who over time has lost his penchant for both sleeping in parks and hitchhiking, repurchased the five-volume trilogy in digital format and accessed its audio and video derivatives via smartphone from the comfort of his armchair, exactly 1,554 kilometres away from the bookshop where he bought the printed version of the book in the early 1980s (and of course he calculated the distance with his smartphone). From his perspective at least, in the past half-century this represents a radical cultural and social change comparable to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

What has happened to the book as a medium in these rapidly changing times? How has digital technology changed the formats, production, and perception of the book? Does the book still have the same social, cultural, and educational function as it did in analogue times? What role does reading play in understanding the media properties of the book? How has the social role of the book and the meaning of book reading changed in the age of digital screens and media convergence? All these questions are difficult to answer because, as we will show, there has never been a clear idea of what a book is and what it does. As Rüdiger Wischenbart noted in 2008, the UNESCO description of the book (see Chapter 3), which held dominance in our understanding of what a book is, did not ‘bother to say much about the originator or the industry that produced the book, nor its realm, distribution or economy; nor does the definition discuss the book’s audience or the process of reading’ (2008, 197). In short, it was a simple description of an object without looking at the complexities of the book’s existence.

With all this in mind we co-authored two papers with Adriaan van der Weel and Rüdiger Wischenbart on the importance of book statistics for media and reading research (2017) and on what a book is (2019). The first paper outlined the measurable properties of book production and consumption. In a second step it analysed the reasons such statistics are necessary. In a third step it proposed the measurement tools that would make the current ecosystem of book reading and publishing more transparent and comprehensible. The second paper was a natural extension of the first; whilst looking at

the gaps in contemporary book publishing and reading statistics, it struck us that more new formats and forms of what we call the book had emerged in the previous two decades than in the preceding century. From this arose the need for a new definition of the book; after all, how could one produce book statistics without clearly defining the main object of measurement?

The 2019 paper did not provide a final and clear-cut answer to this question. The present book is a continuation, dealing with those questions that were only briefly touched on in the two papers, such as the concept of the book as it exists in book history and the role of publishing business models and reading in understanding what a book is and what it does. In doing so we have answered some previously mentioned unanswered questions but – as is the case with any interesting research – we have also opened up a few new ones.

We should state that we take a primarily Western-centric approach to our discussion of the book. A longer work would consider perspectives from other parts of the world, including China, where printing started, or Brazil, where innovative audio recordings of literary works were produced from the 1950s to the 1970s.

In the first chapter we look at the many forms of books that exist in today's book markets and show the social and cultural reasons behind defining a book. In the second chapter we consider controversies in the description of the book as they have arisen in book history. We challenge the approach that counts as part of the book family every piece of written or printed text that was produced, from cuneiform to digital books. We consider such an ecumenical approach misleading, especially if it is based on the assumption that all these physically distinct artefacts that existed in different eras and cultures served similar social and cultural functions. As we will show, in book history debates these common, transhistorical functions have never been described in detail but instead employed vague terms such as 'aura of the book' and 'bookishness'. On this basis we concluded that the book as a concept had become a blind spot, a floating signifier in publishing studies and book history.

In the third chapter we show that the printed book achieved special status in the media landscape of Western societies, triggering the need for a technical definition of the book. Here we build on the 2019 paper 'What Is

a Book?’ and show that the physical properties of the printed book as they developed over the past three centuries gave rise to a book information architecture. We follow this line of reasoning and consider a book not as a thing but as an information architecture that can have a variety of manifestations.

In the fourth chapter we pay special attention to the audiobook as an outlier in the book family. This provides the starting point for understanding the role of book information architecture, the differences between an audiobook, podcast, and audio first series, and the role of reading in the debate over what constitutes a book.

In Chapter 5 we analyse the special status of the printed book in the production and framing of knowledge and information in Western civilization. The book as a medium also framed us as individuals since our perceptions and our ways of thinking were influenced by the object we were observing; our perspective was both inside and outside the object of our research. Following the line of reasoning developed in Adriaan van der Weel’s *Changing Our Textual Minds*, we call this social and cultural conjuncture the Order of the Book. We build on van der Weel’s work by detailing further the protocols and rules that emerged as the consequences of a culture ‘whose entire social fabric is defined by the textual codes of manuscript and print’ (van der Weel, 2011, 91).

In the sixth chapter we outline different modes of reading and discuss both how long-form linear reading relates to the Order of the Book and how the role of reading is changing in the digital landscape. Next, in Chapter 7 we discuss the business model of the book, relying on a set of intermediaries between the author and consumer. Throughout history this business model – similar to Robert Darnton’s communication circuit of the book – had two main forms, a payment model and a membership/subscription model, where the subscription – very often in the form of library fees – was based on the user’s payments or on public money. This model survives into the digital age, albeit with a smaller number of intermediaries and with algorithms as new intermediary players in the field.

All this leads us to the conclusion that the book has three main characteristics that form its social, cultural, and media identity: (a) book-specific

information architecture, (b) a set of properties that made possible the Order of the Book, and (c) a business model. These three interrelated parts form something akin to the Three-Body Problem in physics: an open, unstable system for which there is no general solution in closed form. This creates a difficulty: it is impossible to create a unique and long-lasting definition of the book. There are conjectures put forward in which the ‘three bodies of the book’ form the impression of a stable system, as in the UNESCO definition of the book. However, such stability is only temporary, existing only in the eye of the beholder, who often projects it on to other positions of the three parts or even on to media circumstances in which one of these three parts does not exist. Closer analysis shows that in some cases, with each change of position, the nature of each part also changes. This opens up a whole new debate about what a book is and what it does, which we hint at in the Conclusion.