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Data Storytelling Project – *Nightingale* Article

Fig. 1: wall of books sorted on shelves by color, via wallpapercave.com

Writers Can Benefit from DataViz in the Publishing Industry (So Why Isn't There More of It?)

As a writer and aspiring author of many novels, I admit to overthinking the logistics of books and publishing. In the past, visiting one of my local bookstores aided in clearing my head and getting back into a fogless writing mindset. Something about the smell of a building packed with books, about wandering down the aisles to look at dust jackets and paperbacks in every color, about taking care not to crack spines while browsing through book chapters used to cure me.

Those were moments where I was free to think of a thousand universes of possibilities or grab a book of information on any topic I wanted to learn.

Bookstores bring all things spice into my life. They butter my bread, sweeten my tea, and whatever other cliché you'd like to apply. But the closer I get to the process of taking the next step with my writing (i.e., selling my soul in the hope that someone out there likes my stories), visiting bookstores leaves me with contemplations.

Retail bookstore sales continue to decline. E-book sales keep slowing down. I wonder about never getting the chance to see my novel on a bookstore's shelf because of how the industry is fairing. Maybe I'll publish, but it'll be an online-only affair with dubious marketing plans, and I'll accept mediocrity and aim not to cry myself to sleep at night.

The ruminating gets stressful.

Then I see the towering stands of books set aside with a bright sign labeled #BookTok—which is a subsection of *TikTok* that readers gather on and share recommendations, ratings, and more—and I think, instead of letting the publishing industry's data stress me out, why not see if it can teach me anything?

Fig. 2: #BookTok stand in Barnes & Noble, via BNWaterworks on *Twitter*

I feel traitorous at first. It's a known writing rule that using data to influence your writing is a no-no, because much of writing is about creating what you love and are interested in, not what other people like. By the time you finish writing something based on what used to be trending, people likely won't be intrigued by your book.

Boo, old news! Summon the mobs and get the pitchforks! Except that won't happen because no one's interested, and of the approximate 300,000 books published in the U.S. by traditional publishing companies, less than one percent make it to the shelves—and yours won't be one of them.

But collecting data and riding trends in the publishing world might be what shifts the dwindling industry sales around. The mounting pressure to choose the right book to be the next bestseller keeps growing, and publishers can benefit from turning to data for the magic of fortunetelling.

Just kidding, it's science. Or math. Anyway, moving on.

The ever so tender (and lacking) relationship between data and publishing
For a world evolving to run on data, the habits of consumers keep changing. Every industry must adapt to this staple of the digital age. Many might not think of the publishing as the go-to industry for growing in data reliance, but modern readers look for engaging and personalized customer experiences and for books to not only be relevant to their likes, but to top each other in quality. However, the industry fails to treat data or dataviz as the key to moving forward—which it is. Whether the industry wants to change or not, publishing takes tiny steps toward a fully dependent relationship with data because they have to.

Look at the beginning of the pandemic: some thought the book market would fail—that it had been failing for some time—and with the negative affects brought by the pandemic it would plummet faster than imaginable. In contrast, it brought on an appetite for books.

Physical books now bring in more revenue than E-books despite being lower in sales, and social media trends provide insight into consumer trends and desired content in real-time. Most people have an online life and rely on technology to connect and get through their day, be it for work or escapism. Smart technology, personalized shopping recommendations, tailored social media feeds, all have a grip on the public—even if it's a bit disconcerting on occasion how accurate some of those online suggestions can be. If the publishing industry can collect, analyze, and visualize it for the market, we will see positive results.

Publishers may also lean into cataloging the trends going on with readers, using this data as a tool to churn out what the people want to read and stay ahead of competitors. This will not only boost revenue, but it will set a foundation on which a loyal relationship may be built between the industry and its consumers.

These trends may show up on social networks, through key words in internet searches within the market, etc., but publishers can also examine historical trends to predict future ones. While looking backwards isn't ideal, this helps to view trends that might circle around or areas that weren't successful and should be avoided in the future.

Data and dataviz can help publishers reach the demands they need to meet, and it must be through a synchronous relationship. With the industry building its relationship with data, there's ample chance for the book market to thrive again—it's simply a matter of reshaping to fit the digital age. Though the next years may bring struggle for publishers, faith lingers for a booming book renaissance.

How far can data take publishing?
In short, it's unknown. Anything about the future can change, and predicting technology almost never ends up looking like how future technology ends up (I'm looking at you, *Back to The Future*). But on that note, it's exciting to think about.

The industry, in theory, would change for the better not only for books but by creating new jobs for technical professionals. Then by hiring experts to visualize said data, deciphering what publishers must do in the present and in the predicted future to flourish will become a smooth process. Finding new writing talent, acquiring accurate feedback, and developing along with the digital world.

And maybe, possibly, they may improve their fickle marketing habits. Fingers crossed.

How writers can utilize data, just not to write
I told you writers should never use data to write. I stand by that. But writers can use data—specifically dataviz if the industry grows in that area—to get their stories out there. How?

Be completely up on your research, of course. It may be boring, but so worth it.

What's happening right now in the industry? Take notes on the latest fortunate book proposal from a new author on social media who's kind enough to share their success story with you. The same goes with authors who find agents. Stay attuned to the trends in terms of key words and phrases, then amas your knowledge, break it down, and mold it into a delicious feast marketed to whomever you pitch or query it to. Even look at how other authors have marketed their popular books and include that as you're sending out your manuscript. Get on social media and make a ruckus about your writing. The more people who hear about it, the better.

It'll be more pleasant when the industry begins relying data and dataviz. I'd make it happen this instant if I could. Unfortunately, I'm not a wizard. I can only type out letters and wish for the right person to hear the message. Hopefully, the book world listens soon.

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