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# Shopping for community: the transformation of the bookstore into a vital community institution

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The quest to build something called community has long been a tantalizing and emotion-laden goal in American society. In the face of social conditions that increasingly appear to foster unrootedness, competition and heterogeneity, Americans continue to express a longing for the sense of identity, shared history and common purpose that come from belonging to a communal group. Perhaps one of the more telling indications of the contemporary relevance of this ideal is the number of entrepreneurs who profitably market and sell aspects of 'community'. One example of how the commodification of community is accomplished can be seen by looking at recent events in the book world.

During the last 35 years, a series of startling changes have overtaken the once sleepy business of bookselling in the USA. For much of the country's history, the book trade was both disparaged for its inefficient and archaic business methods, and celebrated for offering a seemingly civilized alternative to the crass commercialism of most industries. But the conditions that gave rise to these competing evaluations began to be altered with the advent of the modern chain bookstore. Waldenbooks, which opened its first retail store in 1962, and B. Dalton Bookseller, a similar chain which was established a few years later, brought to the book trade highly rationalized procedures for title selection, inventory control and marketing. These chains also brought with them the possibility of the formerly decentralized bookselling industry becoming dominated by a few large, centrally administered corporations.

The growing power of the chain bookstores might be shrugged off as yet another story of an industry succumbing to the monopolistic tendencies of

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modern capital. But to do so would mean missing other, more curious developments which have been spurred by the ascendance of the chains. While losing much ground to the national chains, the owner-operated 'independent' bookseller has not died quietly. Instead, a fierce battle for the hearts and pocketbooks of the American public has been waged over the last couple of decades, with moral arguments deployed side by side with slick marketing campaigns. In the process, the very image and function of the bookstore in American society has been transformed. In response to an economic crisis brought about by the chains' competitive practices, and a collective identity crisis resulting from the chains' style of doing business, the book industry has elaborated a conceptualization of the bookstore which regards it as not just any retail establishment, but as a vital community institution. Members of the book trade no longer describe the bookstore as simply a place in which to purchase books, but articulate its connections to community, with all that this term implies.

These booksellers are thus engaging the problem of how to recover a 'lost world' of local communal structures and solidarity, a problem that has preoccupied both citizens and social theorists since the 19th century. Discussions among theorists have generally taken two parallel tracks, with the question of whether social cohesion within modern society has been damaged by the decline of community often accompanied by a debate over the very worth of the community ideal itself. While the intellectual heirs of Tönnies continue to argue that emotional ties and commitments to circumscribed groups based on frequent face-to-face interaction remain necessary for social and individual well-being, others challenge this vision of community as romanticizing repressive and conformist social relations. In this latter view, nostalgia for a communal ideal is not only misguided but irrelevant, as we move from an urban to a global society where people choose to belong to multiple communities on the basis of more salient characteristics than inhabiting a physical place.

However, what critics of the community ideal tend to overlook, and what advocates simply take for granted, is the tremendous symbolic power that the concept of community holds in American culture. The perceived replacement of communal bonds with contractual, interest-based relations, along with a perceived decline of individuals' sense of obligation to their localities, remain perennial themes in American discourse. Moreover, as seen in experiments in residential arrangements from the co-housing movement (Cohen, 1994) to Disney's town of Celebration (Ross, 1997), or in the goals and practices of social movements (Lichterman, 1995; Williams, 1995), ideas about community are capable of organizing action. Likewise, as seen in the strategies of businesspeople such as booksellers, the desire for community can inspire the provision of a commodified experience. In the process, our very understandings of what community is may be transformed.

In this article, I consider the use and the meaning of the community ideal by examining how it has been manifested in both the rhetoric of the book trade, and the activities and promotional efforts of booksellers. Along with this, I explore the implications of positing a retail institution, oriented towards selling commodities and making profits, as a centre and glue of community life. My conclusions here are based on data I gathered from interviews conducted, primarily in New York and California, with 42 members of the book industry (including booksellers, wholesalers and publishing house personnel) and 37 bookstore customers. These interviews were supplemented by observations at conferences and conventions. Further data were obtained from a reading of the trade literature on the book industry of the past 60 years, and an examination of various legal and financial documents.

The current association of the bookshop with the idea of community needs to be understood as the confluence of several different social processes. On the one hand, the chain bookstore's phenomenal success sent independent booksellers searching for a way to stave off their demise. To distinguish themselves from the chains, the independents began to stress their superior selection and service, but gave these familiar retail slogans a particularly moral and political cast. In contrast to the standardized fare said to be found in chain bookstores across the country, the independents claim that their choices of which books to carry represent community control and a responsiveness to community concerns. And in contrast to the bottom-line approach of the chains, the independents claim that the right kind of business, nourished by its vital connections to a local community, can rise above profit considerations to provide the community with a multitude of meaningful services. To fulfill this promise, the role of the bookstore has expanded to include acting as a cultural centre, a place for socializing and a community resource. The result is that the bookstore is increasingly seen as a provider of seminars by renowned authors, a setting in which to linger over a cappuccino, a meeting space for a reading group or an appropriate destination for a Saturday night date. In part a marketing ploy, in part a deeply and sincerely felt sentiment, this emphasis on community service and community embeddedness has become integral to the independent bookseller's identity.

While the bookstore's association with community needs to be placed in the context of the independents' struggle against the chains, it could only make sense if it also struck a chord with at least a portion of the public. And indeed, the independent booksellers are tapping into the distress felt by many Americans over the lack of personalized relations between members of a neighborhood or town, the erasure of local distinctions in favor of a more homogenized mass culture, and the absence of commitment to a locale on the part of businesses which cavalierly take jobs across

state or national borders, or residents who show little interest in civic affairs. In contrast, the independent bookshop promises to preserve local interests, local distinctiveness, and personalized relations. It has thus become a symbol of *gemeinschaft*, and its threatened destruction is mourned as the disappearance of one of the few remaining vestiges of meaningful community life.

Of course, many other retail industries have also seen the demise of mom and pop stores. The economic forces that have propelled the growth of chain bookstores had previously undermined the local grocery store, pharmacy and hardware store. But the unusually strong outcry on behalf of the independent bookstore, both within the book industry and to a lesser extent, among the general public, can be traced to a longstanding ambivalence about the commercialization of the printed word. For two centuries, many members of the book world have charged that hucksterism, greed, ruthless competition and obsequence to the mass market should simply not be associated with something as valuable to society as books. The national chain bookstore, with its rationalized procedures and blatantly profit-driven motives, portends the commercialization of one area of the book industry that had formerly seemed immune to these forces.

Finally, it is telling that the debate over the book's commercialization and the subsequent impact on community life is rarely put in terms of the struggles of public libraries to survive. Rather, most discussions among people in the book world focus on the fate of a retail institution.<sup>1</sup> The transformation of the bookstore into such a potent symbol of community values is therefore also an indication of the 'privatization of public space' (Davis, 1992; Zukin, 1995) and the heightened importance of consumption in American society. As theorists of urban and consumer culture have shown, shopping is increasingly seen as an activity which can provide individuals with entertainment, fulfillment and the opportunity for meaningful connections with others. However, the case of the bookstore raises questions about whether a for-profit business, even one that adopts an anti-commercial stance, can best satisfy those needs that lie behind the desire for community. Members of the book trade may want to construct an institution that can serve and be an integral part of their local communities, but their goal is also to run a business in order to make a profit. At the same time as the bookseller tries to show a sensitivity to community needs, both corporate and independent booksellers generally pay low wages to their employees, engage in manipulative marketing campaigns and encourage individualized consumption. Moreover, their notion of community can be a highly restricted one, limited to the groups of people which are most likely to buy books. A closer look at the ways in which the book trade manages this balancing act can therefore help to clarify the possibilities and limits of contemporary ideas about community.

## Perspectives on community and consumption

Community is, of course, a notoriously vague term, one which can have a wide assortment of definitions and connotations. As Gusfield notes (1975: xv–xvi), it is sometimes used in a territorial sense, to refer to a geographic locality. It is also commonly used to describe a particular quality of human relationships. Frequently, these two meanings get melded together to describe a physical place and set of ideals which are juxtaposed against the world in which most Americans now live. Community connotes the small, such as a rural area, small town or neighborhood, as against large, anonymous urban spaces. Community implies social bonds based on affective ties and mutual support in contrast to instrumental social relations directed primarily by the market. And community evokes a past steeped in tradition as opposed to a constantly changing present (Bender, 1982; Gusfield, 1975). Examples of community cannot, therefore, be easily identified, much less certified as the genuine article. But the lack of sociological precision to this term does not erase its power in American culture. Whether or not most people would really like to return to a pre-urban society characterized by extreme neighborly watchfulness and rigid social obligations, the continued endurance of community as an ideal suggests that it speaks to various preoccupations and dissatisfactions with contemporary social life (see also Cohen, 1985; Hummon, 1990).

Among social scientists, there has been a revived debate about the extent to which it is possible and desirable to achieve the kinds of social relations associated with the communal ideal. In recent years, those scholars calling themselves communitarians have argued that building a sense of community is necessary for restoring moral purpose to collective life in the United States. As Amitai Etzioni, the most visible proponent of the communitarian movement, has written,

Communitarians seek to rebuild community. However, we do not believe that a return to villages or small-town America is necessary. What is needed, rather, is a strengthening of the bonds that tie people to one another, enabling them to overcome isolation and alienation. Above all, it is necessary to reestablish in communities the moral voice that leads people to encourage one another to behave more virtuously than they would otherwise. (Etzioni, 1995b: iii)

In this view, an overly individualistic culture needs to be tempered by Americans recognizing their shared values and interdependence and by creating among the population a deeper sense of responsibility to the common good. When individuals de-emphasize narrow self (or group) interest and recommit themselves to family, neighborhood and civic life, communitarians contend, society will be healthier and people will find greater meaning in their lives (see also Etzioni, 1995a, 1996).

Despite communitarians' insistence that ethnic and other cultural differences can be preserved while a stronger sense of unity as Americans is

achieved, critics remain suspicious that the community ideal is an exclusionary device that demands conformity and ignores very real differences between groups. Iris Marion Young, for instance, states:

This ideal expresses a desire for the fusion of subjects with one another which in practice operates to exclude those with whom the group does not identify. The ideal of community denies and represses social difference, the fact that the polity cannot be thought of as a unity in which all participants share a common experience and common values. (Young, 1990: 227)

While Young distances herself from a liberal conception of atomistic self-reliance, she does argue that the appeal to community masks a fear of diversity and reinforces the inclination of dominant groups to oppress others. Similarly, Richard Sennett (1992) writes about a 'destructive *gemeinschaft*' which not only is suspicious of difference and the unfamiliar, but demands full and open emotional disclosure from individuals. According to Sennett, as the social conditions for a pre-capitalist community have disappeared, people trying to recapture *gemeinschaft* constantly scrutinize one another for signs of not being legitimate community members. They also attempt to set up territorial barricades to keep outsiders away.

Certainly, the ideal of a community with a high degree of intimacy and mutual obligation incorporates both the positive and negative elements these two sets of writers describe. Community, as it is commonly envisioned, is both nurturing and stultifying; it promises to reduce alienation by giving the individual a sense of belonging and social support and to effect socially approved repression by encouraging a rigid moralism that condemns difference. As such, this ideal has the potential to be used in complex and contradictory ways. It is therefore important to consider how the desire for community is actually put into practice; to examine how the dual meaning of community as both territorial and relational gets negotiated and how Americans deal (or not) with the tension between diversity and commonality.

For the book world, the meaning of community is largely taken as self-evident and is certainly accepted as referring to something quite positive. When a bookseller speaks about serving her community, she is in part pointing to a fairly concrete entity – a bounded locality, whether it be neighborhood or town. But she is also conjuring up a vision of that locale which contains certain qualities that render it a nice place in which to live. This ideal community is populated by friendly people who know one another's interests, histories and idiosyncracies. People who share a sense of community care about what happens to the locale and participate in civic affairs. And the community has a particular personality that reflects its geography, its history and the individualities of its residents.



Yet, if the neighborhood bookshop represents a recreation of this ideal, it is also a highly contained version of community, an oasis which the consumer can visit and leave at will. As Fischer (1991) points out, despite a sentimental celebration of the enveloping small town, Americans tend to look for community in voluntary associations where each individual can determine the extent and duration of participation. As a retail store, the bookshop offers the individual even greater freedom than club or church. Community here can be sampled and enjoyed without even the obligation of making a purchase.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, while independent booksellers have highlighted the connections between consumption and larger political and economic issues in important ways, the vision of community that they express is still one primarily centered on the activity of shopping. According to Bellah et al. (1986: 73), the middle-class American frequently equates the notion of community with the 'lifestyle enclave', in which the socially similar leave behind the problems of politics and work to focus on leisure and consumption. In the lifestyle enclave, common tastes and consumption patterns are the bonds that hold people together. Boorstin describes a similar phenomenon when he speaks of the 'consumption communities' that began to be formed in the middle of the 19th century. As he describes it, 'Men who never saw or knew one another were held together by their common use of objects' (1974: 90). It is thus not so surprising that the book trade could hope to foster community by joining book readers with others who share this leisure-time pursuit, or that Americans would look for community inside the doors of a retail establishment.

Many other scholars have written about how a culture of consumption shapes numerous aspects of social and political life (Agnew, 1993; Featherstone, 1990; Lee, 1993; McCracken, 1988). Some take a critical view of consumer culture, showing how, for example, material goods and consumption habits can act as markers and enforcers of class distinctions (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984; Veblen, 1953) or are used to compensate for unsatisfying relationships or jobs, or frustrated aspirations (e.g. Ewen, 1976, 1989; Strasser, 1982). More recently, other scholars have put consumption in a much more positive light, arguing that material items are symbolic resources individuals can use in playful or empowering ways (e.g. Nava, 1992; Willis et al., 1990). While most literature has addressed the symbolic meanings attached to commodities, or the ways in which more and more aspects of life become commodified, a somewhat smaller group of researchers has paid attention to the experience of shopping itself (e.g. Leach, 1993; Shields, 1992). As they suggest, shopping has become a source of entertainment and self-expression; businesses not only promise a fulfilling experience, but even the possibility of making meaningful connections with other people. As I will argue, businesses such as the bookstore truly provide something that is valued by Americans – a



setting many find intellectually stimulating, yet soothing and seemingly removed from the rat-race of modern life. As a bumper sticker that appeared some years ago remarked: 'When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping.' What remains unresolved though, is the price that individuals and society pay when community is commodified.

### **The rise of the chains and the emergence of the bookstore as a community institution**

The notion of the bookstore as a centre of community life in the USA is not an entirely new one. The early American bookseller frequently acted as the local printer and publisher, and often even assumed the duties of postmaster. His establishment was therefore a centre of news and a local gathering spot (Febvre and Martin, 1990: 211; Wroth, 1952: 50). However, by the Civil War, a more set division of labour within the book industry resulted in the development of retail establishments whose sole, or at least primary, purpose was to sell books.

This increased specialization was considered a sign of the book industry's maturity by its leaders. But the narrowing of the bookstore's mission also resulted in its greater marginalization from public life. This was compounded by the tendency of the 'regular' bookshop to cater to the carriage trade – a more affluent, educated group of patrons. The growing mass of working-class readers, on the other hand, was served by drug-stores, discount stores and newsstands which were more willing to stock cheap reprints and 'sensational' literature. While the regular booksellers gained status from their association with elite customers, the business of bookselling remained a highly unprofitable endeavor throughout the first half of the 20th century. Castigated by publishers for employing inefficient and out-of-date business methods and caught in an enterprise that produced only the thinnest of margins, most bookstore proprietors barely scraped by.

This general portrait of bookselling began to change dramatically with the growth of the modern chain bookstore. Of course, bookstore chains, such as Doubleday and Brentano's, had existed in the United States throughout the 20th century. However, the style, methods and geographic reach of the later generation of chains distinguished them from both independent and chain bookstores that came before. In 1962, the Walden Book Company, which originally operated a chain of rental libraries in department stores, opened up its first mall store in suburban Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Four years later, the Dayton Company, a department store firm, opened the first B. Dalton bookstore in a Minneapolis mall. Dalton was launched with an important innovation: it was the first book retailer to

install a computerized inventory system. Another significant event occurred in 1977 when Crown Books was founded by Robert M. Haft. Haft, a member of a family that ran a chain of discount drug stores, determined that Crown would also sell consistently discounted goods and soon the other large book chains were copying the discount formula in varying degrees.

It was these three elements – small stores in malls or shopping centres, selective discounting and computerized inventory control – combined with bright, clean interiors and a focus on quick-turnover titles, that catapulted the chains to such success in the 1970s and 1980s. And after numerous buyouts and changing of hands, these same three chains (in slightly different forms) continued to dominate the book business into the 1990s. Today, the leaders in book retailing are Barnes & Noble (which owns B. Dalton, Doubleday, Scribner's and other chains), the Borders Group (parent of Waldenbooks and now public after being spun off from Kmart in 1995), Crown Books (now owned by Richfood Holdings) and Books-A-Million (a chain based primarily in the South).

The mall chain gained such success in part because it was able to attract a class of readers who had been intimidated by and resented the elitist atmosphere of many independent bookstores. The chains' mall settings and their bold, catchy displays were intended to reassure the consumer that she need not be bookish in order to browse and that shopping here was just like shopping in any other store. The analogy that many observers drew to fast-food outlets was not accidental. As an executive of one chain stated, these stores were designed so that on-the-go consumers could quickly find what they wanted and quickly get out (*Stores*, 1985).

The mall stores were not places that invited lingering. And this became the shortcoming that beleaguered independents seized upon to save themselves. To combat the chains' increasing market share, independent booksellers began to reshape their image – to present themselves as inviting alternatives to the chains' standardized sterility and to emphasize service to the entire community, not just to highly educated elites. By the 1980s, this division of image between the two types of stores appeared to be gaining acceptance among the public, and the bookstore wars died down as chains and independents settled into their respective niches. However, in 1990, the major chain bookstores embarked on a new program to open superstores, huge bookshops with many times the number of titles carried by the average book retailer. This move represented a major shift from the chains' previous strategy. The superstores, which are steadily replacing the mall outlets, not only carry an impressive number of titles, but have also adopted the rhetoric of community service and the activities that many independents had been using to woo the public. The competitive pressures on independents have consequently intensified a great deal. It is also much

less clear now what qualifies as an 'authentic' community retail establishment.

### **The relationship between the bookstore and community**

A Chicago journalist wrote about a bookstore in the following terms:

Everyone who lives in a big, jazzy, digitally produced city of the '90s keeps in a secret pocket a few small pieces that replicate life as it was lived in a safe, sleepy, small town of the 1950s, places you drive over to in a metaphorical Buick. And Unabridged [Bookstore], beneath those stacks of fresh fiction, is a bookish analog to the drugstore soda fountain, the record shop with listening booths, the grocery store where Dobie Gillis used to help his dad out after school. (Anshaw, 1991)

This description of the bookstore as a place that can evoke a lost world is not uncommon. But while nostalgia is an important element in the association of the bookstore with community, it is not the only one. The connection between the bookstore and the preservation of community has several other aspects to it as well. Booksellers stress the personalized relations that develop between bookstore employees and customers. They also claim that the bookstore fills a need in the community by providing a public space in which people can come together for any number of activities. But independent booksellers, and their supporters, also insist that only the independents can properly fulfill these obligations and that only independents can be truly sensitive to local tastes. Further, they argue that the independent supports the community in a cultural sense, by taking a stand against corporate-directed and homogenized shopping experiences and also in an economic sense, by keeping profits within the community.

Both chains and independents speak about how the bookstore supports community life by offering a much needed public space. The bookshop is a comfortable place, often outfitted with overstuffed chairs and classical music, where the individual can linger, for hours if he likes, with minimal interference from salespeople. It is also a place in which like-minded people can mingle and meet, brought together by the rows of books and magazines, or one of the many events sponsored by the store. An industry consultant remarked,<sup>3</sup>

My own non-provable theory of retailing is that increasingly people are going in to buy more than the book. You know, they're going in to buy in some cases an evening out. . . . This element of bookstores as convivial place. I mean the seeds have always been there. Because what's browsing other than sanctioned hanging out.

Many observers have pointed to how retail spots have become the contemporary equivalent of the town square, filling the void left by the

disappearance of spaces once provided by public and voluntary bodies (e.g. Iovine, 1994; Oldenburg, 1989; Sorkin, 1992). Businesses can provide places where hanging out is indeed welcomed, yet where 'security' is preserved by the store or mall manager's right to reject undesirable visitors. When searching for a way to pass the time with friends, or to see and be seen, the commercial establishment is often one of the few locations available to Americans. The bookstore, as a seller of cultural items which invite contemplation and discussion, may appear especially well-suited to this role.

The bookseller also claims to provide a sense of community by establishing personal relationships with her customers. Instead of settling for a situation in which two strangers carry out an instrumental transaction, the good bookseller cultivates a warm acquaintanceship with the people who regularly shop at the store, getting to know them as individuals, rather than as generic consumers. In the bookstore, at least, money changing hands can perhaps be given greater meaning. As one bookseller said,

I mean this is a small store. . . . So I *see* everyone who comes in the store. And because it's a neighborhood bookstore, you see the same people come in over and over again. So you talk to them. And so you ask her periodically, well how's your sister and how she's doing and various things like that. I think that's really important. People come in here on a Monday night and they see my son and they'll come in the store a few days later and say, 'oh your son's working here now.' I think people, not everyone, a lot of people like knowing who they're giving their money to. . . . [Customers say], 'the nice lady over at the [bookshop], she'll order whatever you want and she'll wrap it and she'll send it for you and she's nice.' They like that. I like that too.

Both independents and chain superstores attempt to articulate these connections between what they do and creating a better community. But the independents also stress their contributions to community by making direct comparisons to the chain stores – both mall outlets and superstores. They argue that the bottom-line approach of the chains does not really allow for caring relationships between bookseller and customer to develop. Key to their perspective is the idea that the local independent supports smallness and the human-scale. This sentiment is widespread, even though the independents count among their members some of the largest bookstores in the country. As another truly small bookseller put it:

We like to think that maybe there will be some little backlash, some little feeling in people that they still want to go somewhere where they feel good and not just where they can buy ten thousand of everything for ten percent discount. And I know I feel that way. And I've talked to other customers who do feel that way. Who are a little bit lost out there in that world of supermarket mania.

Independent booksellers argue that because they themselves are members of the communities they serve, they can know community needs much

better than a distantly administered chain could. The home-grown bookstore is said to be more attuned to local tastes and also to have the flexibility to respond to community tastes. Commented another bookseller,

They have to be really, they need to be a part of their community. You can't just drop a bookstore that's the best plan somewhere else in the country in the middle of somewhere and expect it to be a *good* bookstore. It may get its share of the market if it's the only game around or if it has enough special deals that it undercuts everyone's prices. It may get a certain percentage of business. But I wouldn't call it a good bookstore in the sense that it's really meeting the needs of the community.

When asked how booksellers get to know their communities, he replied, 'You live here. You talk to community groups, you invite community groups in, you just ought to know the territory.' This vision of a bookseller who knows the community by being intimately involved with it is frequently contrasted to an image of the corporate chain, located in distant New York, using computer programs to make decisions about bookstores around the country. The chain, it is alleged, is simply not able to comprehend the subtle differences that exist, not only between regions, but between communities within a region. Said a wholesaler, commenting on the San Francisco Bay Area, 'The Barnes & Noble in Marin has a different audience than the Barnes & Noble in Jack London Square. And their ability to carry titles that reflect the audience that they sell to – I don't believe that they do that very well.'

Importantly, the bookstore that reflects the particularities of its community is seen as a bulwark against homogenization. The independents pride themselves on carrying a diverse selection of books and on offering a shopping experience which is unique and therefore more interesting and stimulating than the interminable sameness which is said to characterize the chains. One bookseller described the chains in this way:

I mean I know that that's part of their appeal, it's like the tourist in Paris who goes to eat at McDonalds because they recognize it and it's comfortable to them. So I know that that's a lot of the reason why people would go into Barnes & Noble. Because it's something that they're used to. But there are other people who don't like that, who don't [go] for that very reason. And I don't know, a more individualistic kind of person. A person with broader tastes. A person who hates evil mega-corporations, I don't know.

The idea that the chains represent a standardized, mass culture trampling on local distinctiveness is central to any independent bookseller's argument. A somewhat smaller group, however, also talks about the impact of chain stores on local economies. Chains are said to hurt communities by driving up commercial rental costs, as chains have deep pockets and are willing to sign long-term leases. And unlike the local bookseller who recirculates revenues within the community, the chains take their profits away with them. Said this last bookseller,

It's also, I think, a social issue in the fact that you have local businesses versus national businesses, businesses that don't really care that much about the particular community and they're really not putting anything into it. This money is going into the pockets of someone who lives elsewhere.

Large corporations can additionally not be trusted to remain in a community, but could pull up stakes whenever it is profitable to do so. The independent, on the other hand, is believed to have roots deep enough in a community to stay for the long haul.

The image of the bookstore, particularly the independent bookstore, as a savior of community life is, not surprisingly, most frequently and strongly articulated by independent booksellers. But the book industry in general subscribes to the notion that a bookstore's strength lies in service to and knowledge of its community, while a heated debate over whether the superstores can adequately do this continues. These ideas are also not alien to the general public, though most people may be less passionate about them than booksellers would like. Nevertheless, the prominence of the bookstore as more than just a place to buy books has grown considerably over the last 15 years. The chain-independent competition has produced a remarkable number of ways to draw customers through the doors.

### **The expanded bookstore: where community and marketing meet**

According to Crawford (1992: 14), shopping malls were able to achieve their successes through 'indirect commodification' whereby images and objects not for sale, such as fountains or exhibits, are placed adjacent to the shops. These images reflect on the items being sold which then appear enhanced and more desirable to the consumer. A similar process occurs within the bookstore. The atmosphere and services which project the quality of community help to make the books (or compact disks or t-shirts or other sidelines on display) more appealing. The book never disappears entirely, but can hover on the periphery of all the other activities that the bookstore offers. For instance, it is the book's *author* that is the focus at a signing event. Similarly, books may present an attractive backdrop for the store café which is the patron's destination. In these circumstances, purchasing a book can become almost an afterthought to the various other entertainments offered by the bookstore. The bookstore 'experience' sells the books.

There is a whole range of activities and services which booksellers have developed over the last few decades to support their image as community centres. Some, such as author signings, date back to the earlier part of the century, though they were never so prevalent as they are today. Other services, such as the now ubiquitous bookstore café, are more recent



innovations. But while the contemporary idea of the bookstore as community centre was pioneered by a number of independents trying to distinguish themselves from the mall chain stores, the chain superstores have taken the concept and run with it. Ronald Haft of Crown Books, for example, stated that Crown was trying to make the bookstore into a community centre, bringing in some of the characteristics that used to define Main Streets (Streitfeld, 1993: WB15). Similarly, Borders declared in an annual report to its shareholders that 'the management of each Borders location is committed to making its store a community center, entertainment resource and social gathering place' (Borders Group, 1996: 2), while Barnes & Noble claimed in *its* annual report, 'Like the village tavern, the town square, the corner café, Barnes & Noble bookstores are places where people gather' (Barnes & Noble, 1997a: 5). Since efforts to turn the local independent bookstore into a community resource are also directed at increasing business, the successful actions can be – and are – picked up by national, corporate booksellers. With their greater resources, chain superstores have been able to produce more elaborate events and facilities. And with their greater clout among publishers, superstores are better able to book big-name authors. These efforts have definitely paid off for them. Among the bookstore customers I interviewed, many believed that the chains are the places to go for the author events, the cafés and the like. Consequently, it is not so clear which (or whose) actions qualify as 'authentic' gestures aimed at community enhancement.

Both independent bookshops and chain superstores have done much to turn their stores into community centres. Author appearances remain the most common form of event, with many stores attempting to keep a regular schedule of readings and signings by literary figures. As this independent noted, such events fuse community service with cultivating future customers: 'People know about it, and it gives the stores kind of rootedness in the community. It's free. And people appreciate it. It's expensive [to us], I don't think we make money on this thing. But it's promotion.' Other types of events are also held. One independent bookseller which tries to promote itself as a 'community resource where customers feel welcome for purposes other than buying books' hosts panel discussions, poetry roundtables, reading groups, journal-writing groups, tea parties, raffles and workshops (Frazer, 1994). Children's bookstores sponsor storytelling hours; for the adults, one store offers breakfasts with local business leaders; another hosts cooking demonstrations by cookbook authors; and many offer evening musical programs. A San Francisco Bay Area independent has even started a 'university' that offers classes on writing, language, art and travel taught primarily by local authors and journalists (Bernstein, 1997).

The cafe, either within or adjacent to the bookstore, has been tremendously popular with customers. The prototype of the contemporary

bookstore-cafe was originated in 1976 by Kramerbooks & Afterwards, a Washington, DC, independent (Livingston, 1981). Since then, many other stores have adopted the cafe, hoping that its congenial atmosphere and lure of food and drink will attract customers and so offset the headaches of managing a business which is very different from a bookstore. The cafe is common to both independents and chain superstores. Most Borders stores now have them, as do the Barnes & Noble superstores; in an alliance with another controversial chain, Barnes & Noble formed an agreement with Seattle-based Starbucks to serve its coffee products exclusively.

Cafes, entertainments, and a welcoming atmosphere have combined to turn many bookstores into social centres. Families and friends view a trip to the bookstore as an enjoyable outing to take together, while people on their own see the bookshop as a place where others can be met. This perspective is certainly encouraged by the bookstore. One bookseller includes among her selling tips the advice that if customers are not in a hurry, the bookseller should introduce them to each other, especially if they have something in common (Hoff, 1994: 15). Singles events are also now becoming more typical. For instance, a St Louis bookstore hosted a singles night around role-playing a murder mystery. The event attracted over 250 people (Ryan, 1994). The Barnes & Noble on New York's Upper West Side quickly gained a reputation as something of a singles scene, with the periodicals and gay and lesbian studies sections cited by one employee as particularly promising spots (*New York Times*, 1993). In the bookstore, with its self-selected clientele, singles on the look-out know that not withstanding the bookstore's claim to serve the entire community, the others they meet are likely to be fairly similar to them in education and income, and at least share an interest in reading. Furthermore, many individuals welcome the bookstore as a safer and more mellow environment than the usual bar.

While the bookstore as singles scene has received some amused commentary in the press, less publicized are other bookstore efforts to serve their communities. Many shops open up their spaces for local organizations to use for meetings. Others donate a percentage of their proceeds to community groups, schools or charities. Reflecting on such activities, a small press publisher commented,

Bookstores function as community networks for thinking, essentially. And I guess I really am happy about all of the development of salons around bookstores, and reading groups, and stuff. . . . One of the really most interesting bookstores in that way is Gaia [a local independent. They're saying] people who come into our store, we're all a community of one sort or another, because we're interested in the same kinds of issues. You wouldn't come into the store if you weren't interested in this goddess or nature stuff. So let's try to find ways to come together more and more, and see how we can take some of the ideas that are inside the books in here, and bring them out into the world. But using the store as the centre for doing that. So they've got food drives at holiday time,

and they've done forums on homelessness. I think that's fabulous. You know, I would encourage that kind of bookstore to do that more. To sort of take the natural interests of the people who are coming into the store, and then trying to help us all create community.

These sorts of gestures create goodwill and solidify the ties between bookstore and community. They often give the bookselling endeavor greater meaning, and they make good business sense. As booksellers happily point out, these gestures, by selling the bookstore, sell more books.

### **Consumer satisfaction or community control**

The popularity of the expanded bookstore demonstrates that the atmosphere and entertainments it provides do meet some needs of a portion of the public. Both patrons and industry personnel agree that, because of the items they sell, booksellers are better suited than other retailers to make their stores into community centres. As embodiments of culture with the potential to express the essence of the human condition as well as the vast diversity of human thought, books are viewed as special kinds of objects, a 'sacred product' in Zelizer's (1992) terms. Said an independent bookseller,

I think a bookstore is so different than any other kind of store because it's a place of knowledge and ideas, and it's not like going into a bath shop or a hardware store or whatever. It's a place where you go to consider – whether you talk to anybody or not, it's an area of ideas. And new ideas and old ideas. So it's a different kind of thing than any just any old [store]. It almost borders on not being business, at least in the old days [it did, and] that's what we still cling to.

Nevertheless, the bookstore still *is* a business, a fact that raises questions about the consequences of relying on profit-making enterprises to direct 'community'.

Analysts of modern society (e.g. Lukács, 1971) have long noted that the progression of capitalism results in the commodification of an ever-increasing number of human needs and desires, including those once seen as antithetical to market relations. Therefore, it is both predictable and peculiar to find community, an ideal whose essence is public and cooperative, being reconceptualized as an alienable experience, produced by private organizations, and sold to individual consumers. Local residents are now encouraged to look to savvy businesses to provide this 'service', rather than shouldering responsibility for creating their preferred version of the community ideal.

However, the high degree of instrumental calculation demanded by the market would appear to be at odds with the affective attachments and unconditional devotion to the common good implied by the notion of

community. And indeed, the need to sell as many books as possible may present some constraints on what even the most dedicated bookseller can do. When friendliness is a competitive advantage, and when offering space to community groups is part of a marketing plan, these gestures are subject to withdrawal if too much of a money loser. Furthermore, local residents who do not have the means or inclination to buy books are in effect excluded from this arena. The old communal problem of how to incorporate the socially different has simply been defined away as the outcome of individual consumer choices.

All this is not to say that the activity of consumption or retail businesses are irrelevant to the life of the community and its residents' well-being. And the bookstore, while perhaps unable to deliver on all of its community-connoted promises, may still play an important role in contributing to a neighborhood's social fabric. As Zukin (1995) has argued, those businesses that cater to cultural consumption are central to a city's 'symbolic economy', the production of public space and symbols which shape a social identity. It is when considering the bookstore's relation to the broader economic forces affecting a locale, and to a community's cultural character, that the contest between the independents and the chains may be most significant.

It is doubtful that the majority of customers are distinguishing between the community service provided by the chains and that provided by the independents in the same ways that book industry personnel do. Even when they do make this distinction, what may count most of all in consumers' decisions about where to purchase books is where they can receive discounts. And the chains, with their economies of scale and potentially favorable treatment by publishers (the matter has been litigated), are able to sell books at significantly lower prices than can the independents. An independent bookseller noted,

I mean I have people come into my store all the time who say 'it's so wonderful to have you here.' And I know they then walk six blocks away and do their major purchases at Crown. So as much as they want me here, they only have twenty-five dollars to spend on books this month, and they can buy more books for that. And I understand that. I *really* understand that. But I think we need to make some decisions. My best example of what goes on on a certain level is [the area where] I live. . . . People feel very strongly about keeping their neighborhood together. So they're willing to spend more money at Sam's deli than going to the Safeway. Because they want Sam to be there. There's meaning behind that for them. And I think unfortunately where [my store is], people don't have that kind of feeling about small businesspeople. And at the same time they complain that people have gone out of business. I don't think people get it that they can't have both. They can't have the nice guy down the street who will do all those last minute things, or order a book for you, or fix your flat tire for only a dollar, and then go to Price Club and buy all their major purchases. It's just not going to work.

As these comments suggest, Americans are highly ambivalent about the value of their local institutions. And when limited to their roles as consumers, people appear unlikely to draw connections between their activities and political concerns, or care to take control of the economic changes affecting their communities. An orientation towards community that views it as an experience to be purchased (preferably at a bargain) is one that stresses entertainment and conflict-free, 'friendly' interaction, and ignores the issue of how power within the community is distributed.

Certainly, the balance of power between the chains and independents has shifted dramatically in favor of the former during the last half-dozen years. But it may also be the case that a similar process is occurring between local communities and large chain retailers. Unlike most independents, whose very economic marginalization makes them susceptible to local control, a national chain is not dependent on any single community. This has several implications for how the chain operates.

In the first place, while the mission of any private enterprise places limits on its ability to act in a community's best interest, the structure of large, national corporations requires a decidedly non-local orientation. For instance, the manager of a superstore told me,

Well, to be very honest with you, I've been involved in this specific community for a long, long time . . . I just know the area very well, and that's why I was hired for this position, not because I had any retail skills, but just because I knew books, I knew people, and I knew the area very, very well.

However, three years later, this same manager was transferred to another city to set up a new superstore there. When the long-term welfare of the organization is paramount, rather than any one particular outlet, not only personnel, but the stores themselves are made mobile as the firm's needs requires. And so, while the chains have been opening branches at a breathtaking pace the past few years, these outlets' longevity may be in question. In several cities, superstores owned by the same parent chain have opened in close proximity to one another, a move apparently made to prevent a rival from securing a prime location. A chain can afford to lose money as its own stores 'cannibalize' one another while it attempts to weaken competitors and establish dominance in a geographic area. It is quite probable that, within a few years, outlets that do not meet revenue targets will start to be closed. In such cases, some neighborhoods may find themselves without any bookstore at all.

Similarly, a company such as Barnes & Noble may claim,

Throughout his tenure as America's Poet Laureate, Robert Hass met with business and civic leaders across the country. 'Capitalism makes networks,' Hass reminded them; 'imagination makes communities.' At Barnes & Noble, both forces are in effect. As entrepreneurs, we are compelled to deliver appropriate returns on invested capital; as booksellers, we are driven to

contribute to the intellectual life of the communities we serve. (Barnes & Noble, 1997a: 3)

Yet, there is little doubt that this firm, like the other publicly traded chains, is primarily answerable to its investors. This becomes clear when looking more closely at organizational policies. For example, in an explanation of executive compensation, Barnes & Noble states, 'The general purpose of long-term awards, currently in the form of stock options, is to align the interests of the executive officers with the interests of the Company's stockholders' (Barnes & Noble, 1997b: 13). While its executives and employees may truly desire to contribute to local intellectual life, shareholders tend to demand that a company do whatever is necessary to produce a steadily increasing rate of profit. And in an acknowledgement of this, the company pegs the compensation of its senior executives to an earnings-per-share target which is mandated to rise from one year to the next (Barnes & Noble, 1997b: 12).

National chains are also not set up to prioritize the long-term economic health of the communities in which they settle. So, while sales taxes from a branch outlet may benefit an area, the profits that are generated do not stay within the community. They are either distributed to the company's shareholders, or used to build up the enterprise. Additionally, large retailers have the means to drive up rental prices (and indeed, are favored by developers and commercial landlords for that reason), making it harder for remaining local businesses to stay solvent.

As large, bureaucratic organizations administering far-flung networks of outlets, chain operations and decisions are either centralized or centrally monitored. There are several consequences to this. The virtually identical architecture and design of a chain from one location to another renders the notion of a locale's distinct visual character irrelevant. And although the question of exactly how the selection of the chains differs from that of the independents is very difficult to answer, the chains' centralized buying systems do mean that the great majority of an outlet's offerings are the result of centralized decisions.<sup>4</sup> Even when local managers are authorized to acquire titles to reflect their understandings of local tastes, they can only buy books available from the chain's approved list of suppliers. The result is that local store autonomy is firmly circumscribed.

These aspects of the chains' operations suggest that while their bookstores may provide appreciated services to some members of the community, their ability to reflect community identities is greatly restricted. Instead, as du Gay and Negus (1994) have argued in reference to music megastores, the corporate chain is extremely good at monitoring consumers and creating stores that can appeal to numerous market segments. Certainly, the chains themselves are well aware of the difficulties involved in selling their stores as community institutions, and they make concerted



efforts to play down the corporate connection. Indeed, their promotional statements frequently seek to emphasize how un-chainlike their stores are. An ongoing public relations campaign has become necessary to reconcile the traditional community ideal with the reality of the large, national, powerful corporation.

Because the appeal to community remains such a powerful force in American culture, it has been profitably employed by both independent and chain booksellers to sell the bookstore experience and to sell books. But it also has the potential to be used in more explicitly political ways. In the battle of the bookstores, independent booksellers have tried to highlight the inconsistencies in equating a large corporation with a vital local institution. Their efforts have so far met with limited success. And it is unlikely that they will achieve greater support until they stop addressing their constituents as consumers, and instead address them as citizens.

## Notes

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1. Consistent with this is the fact that more books are actually purchased than are obtained from libraries. A 1983 survey showed that 19 percent of books read were borrowed from a public, school or employer library. On the other hand, 49 percent of books read were purchased by the reader. An additional 29 percent were either received as a gift or borrowed from a friend or relative and it can be safely assumed that most of these were at some point purchased (Market Facts, 1984: 168). Unfortunately, no more recent national surveys comparing book purchasing to library use have been conducted.

2. This is born out by the behavior of shoppers. One survey found that in their last ten visits to a bookstore, 54 percent of people had actually bought a book, while 46 percent were just browsing (Wirthlin Group, 1994). And in my interviews with bookstore customers, very few said that they always intend to purchase a book when going into a bookstore.

3. Unless otherwise noted, the following quotes come from interviews I conducted with members of the book industry.

4. This is not to say that a central office is sending all the same books to each branch outlet. The chains use extremely sophisticated computer systems to determine the 'best mix' of titles for each outlet.

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