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Book Hunger

“Half the world suffers from hunger. The other half wants to lose weight.” So read a slogan I once saw chalked on a campus sidewalk. Its irony was aimed at the global food crisis, but the same paradox holds true for books. If you are reading this book, you almost surely belong to the latter group. As readers in a world of abundance, you and I struggle to manage our textual diets in the limited time we have. Amazon.com now offers more than a million titles for instant digital delivery. Whether we use a library, a bookstore, or a digital device, our main challenge is choosing among all the appetizing options.

For most of the world’s population, however, things are very different. In the 1980s, economic crises across

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Africa sparked desperate shortages of food and many other goods, including books. It was in this context that writers first began to speak of the continent as suffering from a “book famine.” Yet the problem was not limited to that decade; books were always too scarce, and still are. Today, many countries in sub-Saharan Africa still cannot provide a textbook for every student. While book hunger is most severe in Africa, it remains a problem in every region of the world. Asia’s four billion residents speak more than 2,300 languages, but only a minority of these have active publishing industries. Most cities in Brazil have no bookstores, although the Latin American country is one of the world’s largest economies.

Over the past several decades, governments around the world have made great strides in expanding opportunities for primary education and ending illiteracy. More than 90 percent of the world’s young adults possess basic literacy, defined as the ability to read and write a simple sentence in any language. Unfortunately, half of them still lack access to the reading materials necessary to make this skill truly life-changing. For around one billion children, a hunger for books is holding back their education—their best hope for escaping from poverty. Three billion adults remain impacted by their childhood experience with book hunger. This is more than half of the world’s population.

Book hunger is also a serious issue for lower-income families in the United States. In a survey conducted in 2016 for the “Read Aloud 15 Minutes” national campaign, 93 percent of American parents agreed with the statement, “It is a parent’s responsibility to begin teaching their child how to read on their own.” Many parents reported difficulty in obtaining books, however, with half complaining that children’s books are too expensive. The Forum on Child and Family Statistics reports that four out of every ten American children live in families that have trouble paying for basic needs like food, shelter, and clothing. For families below the poverty line, maintaining a private book collection that grows with the child is an investment they cannot afford.

The Importance of Books

Whether in paper or digital format, books play a very special role in our literary diets. Their longer form provides a unique opportunity to explore ideas and stories in depth. More so than newspapers, blog posts, or social media, books challenge us to expand our horizons of knowledge and imagination. They offer opportunities to acquire tools and concepts we can put to use in our personal lives, our communities, and our businesses. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum has identified reading and

self-expression as among the fundamental capabilities that every person should be enabled to exercise. She emphasizes that education, through engagement with texts, is central for critical thinking, world citizenship, and imaginative understanding. In the words of one of George R. R. Martin's characters, "A mind needs books as a sword needs a whetstone, if it is to keep its edge."

While the importance of access to nonfiction works such as textbooks and reference books may be most obvious, books of all types are vital. Many of life's most important lessons are conveyed most effectively in a story. Novelist Neil Gaiman argues persuasively that fiction serves a particularly powerful need as a vehicle for cultivating social imagination. Novels and personal memoirs cultivate the ability to relate to and empathize with people different from ourselves. Science fiction encourages the imagination and creativity from which technological innovation grows. Nonfiction enables adults to keep learning and growing beyond their formal education. Short stories and novels develop the advanced literacy skills that people need to succeed in formal education and to make use of text-based informational resources. For children, picture books and chapter books are essential steps on the path to advanced literacy, as well as opportunities for emotional growth.

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An extensive body of research demonstrates that a book-rich environment is critical to a child's educational achievement and future income. The "book effect" has been demonstrated in countries both rich and poor, communist and capitalist, and across diverse cultures. Sociologists Mariah Evans, Jonathan Kelley, and Joanna Sikora reviewed studies on the relationship between books and life outcomes from forty-two countries. They found that even the smallest of home book collections benefit children, and these benefits increase with the size of the collection. Growing up in a home with at least two hundred books promotes a child's future success more powerfully than having parents with college degrees. This rigorous body of research proves what those of us who grew up with books already know. Children who read regularly for pleasure become fluent readers, take joy in learning, and perform well in school.

In the United States, book hunger strikes hardest during summer break. Researchers have known for more than a decade that students of all socioeconomic levels develop their reading skills similarly in school. What happens in the summer, however, produces a profound achievement gap. Students from middle- and higher-income families continue to steadily improve their reading skills, but those from lower-income families do not. "Summer vacations created a

gap of about 3 months between middle- and lower-class students,” according to a meta-analysis by Harris Cooper and colleagues. Researchers such as Richard Allington, Julie Au, Doris Entwisle, Gary Evans, Stephen Krashen, Jim Lindsay, Anne McGill-Franzen, Jeff McQuillan, Fay Shin, and Nicole Whitehead have all drawn the connection between summer reading and access to books.

An experiment by Richard Allington and colleagues served to clearly demonstrate this effect. First- through fourth-graders from high-poverty schools participated in the study. Half were randomly selected to participate in a book fair, where they could choose ten books to take home for the summer. Simply receiving ten books, with no further intervention, led to greater summer reading. Over three years, reading achievement scores among this group noticeably improved compared to a matched group of students who were not given books. Modest interventions to encourage students to read their books more frequently can further strengthen the effect. No amount of urging will have an impact, however, if the child cannot get access to appropriate books.

The Limits of Commercial Publishing

Markets have worked astoundingly well at producing and delivering an ever expanding variety of novels, textbooks,

nonfiction, and children's books for affluent English speakers. You and I have book collections that would be the envy of kings and queens from an earlier age. Low-income readers, however, are largely priced out. Like health care, education, and car seats, books are what economists would call "merit goods." It is socially desirable for everyone to have access to them, but this can only be achieved through subsidies or free provision. Economic theory predicts (accurately) that markets will form to produce many merit goods. Without charitable and government support, however, many people will be excluded.

Book hunger is particularly resistant to market solutions because of the extreme diversity of products readers need. Economist Joel Waldfogel explains that markets work best when large numbers of people want the same things, but they are likely to fail to serve consumers with less common preferences. A vaccine developed for insured patients in Paris can also be used by residents of remote villages in India. The same is not true with books. The book market especially fails at producing diverse books for cultural minorities, accessible books for readers with blindness or dyslexia, and books in disadvantaged languages.

Consider the Zulu language, which is spoken by ten million people in South Africa. The vast majority of Zulu speakers are literate. Every day, Zulu newspapers sell

hundreds of thousands of copies. With an average household income around \$5,000 U.S., however, very few Zulu speakers can afford to purchase books. As a logical consequence, the Zulu book publishing industry is next to non-existent. The Publishers' Association of South Africa counts only seven hundred Zulu books currently in print. The vast majority of these are children's books produced with charitable and government subsidies for use by schools. Because Zulu is not widely spoken outside of South Africa, this is not just a national total, but also a global one.

Some economists would say that the market's failure to produce more books in Zulu and other disadvantaged languages proves that there is no real demand for such books. Yet poor consumers also buy fewer cars and coats, and we do not scratch our heads and wonder why. No one imagines that the poor simply do not wish to drive cars, or that they have some sort of cultural preference for being cold. Like driving a car and dressing warmly, reading costs money, and not everyone has it.

A parallel problem exists in book publishing and drug development. Public health experts refer to tropical epidemics like leprosy, sleeping sickness, river blindness, dengue fever, and Guinea worm disease as "neglected diseases." Collectively, these diseases and others like them

trap one billion people in poverty. Yet drug companies have no financial incentive to produce treatments for them, because the diseases are overwhelmingly concentrated among the global poor. Those who need the product cannot afford to pay for it. Those who can afford to pay for the product do not need it. Similarly, commercial publishers have no incentive to produce books for “neglected languages.” The biggest profits lie in publishing for global languages spoken by hundreds of millions of potential buyers. Smaller profits can be made in national languages whose speakers are generally affluent, such as Dutch, Swedish, Hebrew, and Korean. Where a language’s speakers are predominantly poor, however, the economics of publishing simply do not bear out.

Market failure does not mean that book hunger is an unsolvable problem. It simply means that we must look to charitable and public approaches to pick up where markets leave off. We must begin to think about books in the same way we think of education and health care. Market, charitable, and government efforts are all needed, or too many people will be left out. Indeed, this has long been the case. Philanthropists founded public libraries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to bring the luxury of reading within reach of the common man. By themselves, however, libraries cannot achieve this goal. Children’s

television programming comes straight to the home, with hundreds of options available at no direct cost. Books must become similarly convenient if they are to compete effectively for children's time. Libraries also have very limited reach in most of the world, are expensive to run, and are limited to purchasing titles already in print. In the twenty-first century, more innovative approaches are needed.

Why and How to Read This Book

Ending Book Hunger is intended for publishers, writers, artists, librarians, teachers, philanthropists, policymakers, nonprofit leaders, and anyone else interested in how to turn "the right to read" into a reality. My goal is to give readers from every field a clear picture of nonprofit publishing as an emerging field of social enterprise.

One of the best-known examples of social enterprise is the microlending model pioneered by Bangladeshi economics professor Mohammed Yunus and the Grameen Bank. Microfinance lifts living standards among the very poor by providing women with tiny loans to start or expand their own microenterprises. Because this model generates a return on investment, it has been able to expand to serve over 200 million families in three decades. To achieve this, however, Yunus and his fellow social entrepreneurs

had to innovate solutions to every problem that had kept traditional banks from effectively serving this population. As the microlending example demonstrates, social enterprise can be transformative when it introduces a new business model to deliver a socially important product or service that is effective, sustainable, and scalable.

My research convinces me that a similar potential exists in efforts to end book hunger. Mainstream publishing models currently reach a tiny fraction of all people, while newer models hold the potential to serve many times more. The nonprofits profiled here represent the cutting edge of this innovation. They are laser focused on developing new models of book development and distribution because they understand that innovation is essential to their mission. While book hunger affects readers of all ages, existing nonprofit efforts are almost entirely focused on serving children. Most of this book therefore focuses on nonprofits promoting access to children's literature. This is sensible as a starting point, both because this is where charitable dollars flow most freely and because adults will not read books if they did not learn to as children. The underlying innovations, however, can also be applied to trade publishing for adults.

The first half of this book offers an in-depth, detailed survey of the state of the art in nonprofit publishing.

Through my conversations with nonprofit leaders, I have identified four major challenges that all efforts to address book hunger must overcome. These include: reaching readers who cannot afford the going prices, serving a more diverse population, developing new titles in neglected languages, and developing more cost-effective distribution methods, both in print and digitally. These challenges are developed in Chapters 2 through 5. In each of these chapters, I will introduce you to nonprofits that are doing a particularly good job at addressing these challenges and explore what we can learn from their efforts.

Of course, any publisher wishing to tap into the vast potential market of people who do not yet buy books must address these same four challenges. Organizations focused on social impact rather than profit simply have a greater sense of urgency. They cannot accomplish their institutional mission unless they find solutions to these persistent challenges. This pushes them to devote greater resources to experimentation and to take on the significant risk of trial and error. As social entrepreneurs figure out new techniques to serve their target readers, mainstream publishers and booksellers should find it profitable to imitate their tactics.

The second half of the book proposes several ways to further increase the impact of nonprofit publishing. I begin

by explaining why nonprofits find it so challenging to secure copyright permissions from publishers. I then explore five possible solution spaces. These include: more coordinated approaches to granting permissions, relying on copyright law's fair use exception, enacting new exceptions to address book hunger, using Creative Commons licenses to encourage sharing, and leveraging non-monetary incentives for authorship. Although I write from my background as an expert in copyright law, I assume that most of my readers have no prior knowledge of law. These chapters rely heavily on storytelling and concrete examples to keep the main ideas and proposals clear and memorable.

The creativity of social entrepreneurs is fascinating and inspiring, but we cannot simply celebrate their accomplishments. Difficult questions must also be asked. Nonprofit publishers and book dealers are now serving tens of millions of readers—but this is just 1 percent of the world's book-hungry population. How can this effort scale up to produce and distribute enough books to meet the enormous social need? With this grand challenge in mind, the book concludes by sketching out a highly cost-effective model that could end book hunger for a billion children by 2030. My research leads me to the conclusion that a mass translation effort offers the most cost-effective approach to title creation. On the distribution side,

nonprofit approaches can have even greater impact if digital distribution is used effectively. For print copies, nonprofit efforts should be supplemented by commercial and government approaches. I believe, however, that a problem this large requires many good ideas and even more helping hands. Whether you are a publisher, author, illustrator, educator, bookseller, librarian, or any other kind of book lover, I invite you to join an important public conversation about how we can overcome barriers and finally bring books to billions of new readers.