

Modelling Subscription-Based Streaming Services for Books

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Article abstract

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ABSTRACT

By departing from the Nordic countries, the purpose is to explain and conceptualize how subscription-based streaming services for books operate in the contemporary book trade, and furthermore to discuss what effects these new business models are causing regarding the production, distribution, and consumption of books. A model is proposed that outlines the aspects of streaming services and the relationships to other actors involved. The model illustrates how streaming services affect the entire chain of publishing, and influence the constitution of books in contemporary digital culture. Since audiobooks are by far most popular, the production get altered to suit this format. Streaming services themselves also act as publishers, which makes them powerful. Distributional aspects are both more complex and more important in streaming services than in traditional book retailing. When consumption is transferred to digital platforms, the distributional frame and the final product converge, and consumer data becomes a key source of information.

RÉSUMÉ

À partir du cas des pays nordiques, l'article cherche à décrire et à conceptualiser le fonctionnement des plateformes de diffusion en continu de livres au sein du marché du livre. Il s'intéresse également à l'incidence de ces nouveaux modèles d'affaires sur la production, la distribution et la consommation de livres. Les différents aspects des plateformes de diffusion en continu y sont modélisés, dont les liens entretenus avec divers autres acteurs du livre. Le modèle met en évidence la manière dont ces plateformes affectent toute la chaîne de l'édition et influencent la constitution des livres au sein de la culture numérique actuelle. La popularité des livres audios est telle que la production du livre doit se plier aux exigences de ce format. Les plateformes de diffusion en continu elles-mêmes font office d'éditeurs, ce qui leur confère du pouvoir. La distribution est à la fois plus complexe et plus sensible dans ces plateformes que dans le commerce du livre traditionnel. En effet, lorsque la consommation du livre passe par des plateformes numériques, la

structure de la distribution et le produit final convergent, et les données clients deviennent une source d'information inestimable.

Keywords

Streaming, audiobooks, Ebooks, digital book distribution, Subscription-based book sales

Mots-clés

Diffusion en continu, livres audios, livres électroniques, distribution numérique de livres, vente de livres par abonnement

In 2020, a threshold was crossed in the Swedish book trade. The official book statistics reported that more than half of the volumes sold (57 percent) emanated from digital streaming services. Although the corresponding market share in terms of revenue was substantially lower (24%), and although there are some uncertainties regarding what is considered to be a “volume sold” in subscription-based streaming services—which do not sell individual volumes but rather access to a wide range of digital titles, provided to customers who pay a monthly fee—the shift in majority from print to digital signals a breaking point in the digitalization of the book trade that has been ongoing for a couple of decades.¹ Importantly, this development is driven by audiobooks in Sweden; it is audiobooks and not ebooks that constitute the overwhelming majority of material consumed through streaming services.²

Recent years have seen a rapid increase in the production and consumption of audiobooks.³ This is true throughout the world,⁴ but the tendency is particularly prominent in the Nordic countries, especially in Sweden. Even more striking is the strong position of subscription-based streaming services for books in the Nordic region (and again, especially in Sweden), when compared to other markets. In *Book Wars: The Digital Revolution in Publishing* (2021), John B. Thompson studies the US and the UK book trade, and his conclusion on the potential for subscription models is quite reserved:

[I]t seems likely that subscription will continue to play a relatively minor role in the evolution of the ecosystem of books in the Anglo-American world. Despite the many announcements of the arrival of the Netflix for books, subscription services in the book industry have not

acquired anything like the significance they have in music, film and television industries.⁵

Here, Thompson leaves open the possibility that this will change in the future. However, his observations do not apply to the current state of book affairs in the Nordic countries.

The popularity of streamed audiobooks is part of a bigger and ongoing shift in the way we consume media, especially music and video content. But it also reflects previous technological shifts in the book trade, and can be analyzed within a publishing and book historical framework. The streamed audiobook boom can be understood as a change that affected book distribution, production, and consumption simultaneously, causing effects and disturbances on all ends, among writers, publishers, readers, libraries, and beyond. An investigation of the audiobook boom and its impact on Nordic literary culture and the Nordic book trade will thus have important implications for the field of book history quite broadly.

The purpose of the article is to contextualize streamed audiobooks by placing the ongoing structural changes and their effects within a book historical framework. More concretely, we propose a model that describes how subscription-based streaming services function, and how they affect the production, distribution, and consumption of books. Notably, we do not consider these processes as separate categories. Rather, and as the proposed model will demonstrate, the production, distribution, and consumption of books are becoming increasingly interrelated, and harder to distinguish from each other. Thus, our study not only sheds light on subscription-based streaming services as a specific tendency in the Nordic countries, but also contributes to a broader discussion about the impact of new digital distribution models on the global contemporary book market.

Previous Research

Although the large commercial impact of audiobooks is a novel phenomenon, the format as such is not new. As Matthew Rubery shows in *The Untold History of the Talking Book* (2016), the history of the audiobook goes back to the invention of the phonograph.⁶ The emergence of digital streaming services for books, however, has paved the way for new modes of

production, distribution, and consumption of audiobooks, and the increase in accessibility and popularity of the format has also affected its function and cultural status. The previous role of audiobooks as a mere support to print books is currently being questioned, and audiobooks are increasingly considered to be a medium worthy of recognition.

An early study in the Nordic context was *Digital Audiobooks* (2016) by Iben Have and Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen, which examines how the digitization of audiobooks leads to new users and new ways to experience literature.⁷ In the last few years, several studies considered streamed audiobooks in Nordic countries from various angles: they have looked at production and born-audio works;⁸ textual patterns in streamed audiobooks;⁹ consumption behaviour in streaming services;¹⁰ and distributional aspects of subscription-based business models and platform design.¹¹ Some researchers have also proposed models over digital audiobooks and streaming services.¹²

Taken together, the research on streaming services and digital audiobooks in the Nordic region is developing rapidly and emerging as a field of its own. Nevertheless, there have still not been any previous studies documenting the effects of subscription-based streaming services on the book trade more broadly. This is our ambition.

Theoretical Background

In studying the impact of streaming services on contemporary book culture, we draw on book historical perspectives that theorize how the medial and material framing of literature affects how it is perceived. In *The Textual Condition* (1991), Jerome McGann proposes that literary works consist of linguistic codes (i.e., the text) as well as bibliographic codes (i.e., the material framing of the text; the book), and that both of these things together constitute the work.¹³ McGann's terminology can be related to Gérard Genette's concept of *paratext*, which he defines as everything sanctioned by the author and/or publisher that circulates around a literary text, embedding it and helping the reader to interpret it.¹⁴ Moreover, McGann, and to some extent also Genette, argues that publishers and authors in tandem affect the work.¹⁵ When it comes to streaming services, however, the distributor plays a crucial role in the framing of literary works. Thus, the line between

production and distribution of books is blurred in the case of digital streaming services. This calls for an updated understanding of how books as material objects should be regarded in a digital streaming environment.

Numerous scholars have considered how digitalization affects the publishing industry.¹⁶ More seldom, however, are such accounts focused upon subscription-based business models. In this context, two perspectives are key. First, subscription-based streaming services are based on digital platforms, and it is essential to consider the structure of these platforms, the algorithms at work behind their web interfaces, and how these things affect book consumption. Personalized recommendation systems are turning the art of selling books upside down. Everyone gets their own custom-made book shop, based on what they already read, instead of being exposed to the same titles as all other customers. As several scholars have pointed out, this risks fostering consumption behaviour where you stick to what you already know, and what complements your tastes, even though “everything” is potentially available.¹⁷ Second, consumers primarily buy books in digital formats when there is no intrinsic value in owning or keeping the book after reading. The paradigmatic example of this trend is the subscription-based model, where subscribers pay for temporary access to a whole catalogue of books. Subscription-based access thus greatly facilitates the consumption of literature, but has potentially negative effects on other significant parts of bookish culture, such as books as signifiers of taste, books as gifts, or books as furnishing in bookshelves.¹⁸

Since it is primarily audiobooks that attract consumers to streaming services in the Nordic region, it is important also to understand the medium of the audiobook *as audio*. The differences between books-as-text and books-as-audio are in many respects more fundamental than the differences among other book formats, since it is not only a change of medium or of material conditions, but also of the sense used when consuming the text. While incunables, three-deckers, hardcovers, paperbacks, and digital epub-files diverge in many ways, they are all read with your eyes. Audiobooks, on the other hand, are consumed by listening with your ears. To use Elisa Tattersall Wallin’s words, audiobooks are read by listening, whereas most other book formats are read by seeing.¹⁹

There is, of course, a long tradition of oral literature.²⁰ While oral storytelling never went away, the recent boom in audiobook consumption and especially the turn towards streaming services affects not only what kind of literature is being consumed, but also the social contexts in which books are consumed. Following this development, the success of streamed audiobooks may be related to a broader turn towards aurality in contemporary culture, as described, for example, by Llinares, Fox, and Berry, and which is especially reflected in the so-called podcast revolution.²¹ Listening to streamed audiobooks can furthermore be related to other forms of mobile listening and consumption of streamed music and podcasts which have been discussed within the field of sound studies by scholars such as Michael Bull.²² Consuming streamed audiobooks is quite different from consuming non-audiobooks, and thus, it is relevant to examine how the streamed audiobook format influences the material, medial, and social conditions of book consumption.

Over the years, numerous models and schemas to describe the chain of book production and distribution have been published. The most well known is doubtless Robert Darnton's "communications circuit" (1982), but others of note are Lars Furuland's "literary process" (1970), Hans Hertel's "media elevator" (1996), Johan Svedjedal's "professional function in the book trade" (2000), and Claire Squires and Padmini Ray Murray's "digital publishing communications circuit" (2013),²³ as well as more recent models for audiobooks specifically.²⁴ The ones thematically closest to our model, and which we will go through in some detail below, are Iben Have and Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen's (2019) audiobook-focused reworking of Squires and Ray Murray, and Colbjørnsen's (2020) generic model of media streaming services.²⁵

In "The Streaming Network," Terje Colbjørnsen presents a model of media streaming services that maps out the power relations involved. Basically, a streaming service controls a database with content that can be accessed by users through a device and/or interface, and by paying a fee. It is not primarily the streaming service itself that produces the content, however, but content publishers, who enable access to their work in the streaming service database in return for payment.²⁶ An important part of the model is that it highlights both flows of payments (from users to streaming service, and from streaming service to content publisher) and parallel flows of data.

User consumption data is an increasingly important asset in the digital economy, and this data can be used not only to improve the platform, but also to generate money by selling information to interested parties. While Colbjørnsen's model is accurate and flexible, it is still too generic to be of real value for analyses of the book trade.

Similarly, Have and Stougaard Pedersen present a “digital audiobook circuit,” a reworking of Squires and Ray Murray's “digital publishing communication circuit,” which in turn is based on Darnton's model from 1982.²⁷ It moves similarly from author to publisher, distributor, retailer, device, reader, and then back again to author. Have and Stougaard Pedersen have modified the scheme by inserting audiobook publishers (between publishers and distributors), as well as increasing the emphasis on the significance of social media platforms in the feedback loop from readers back to authors.²⁸ They make a point of the model being media sensitive, i.e., working only for audiobooks. However, all steps in their model apart from the “audiobook publishers” would also apply to ebooks, and the media-specific aspects of the audiobook, such as the performing narrator, are not visible in the model. Furthermore, the model puts very little emphasis on the power of the streaming services platforms, and the subscription-based model of selling (audio)books.

Although one could argue against the need for yet another model, we believe the impact of subscription-based streaming services on the book trade to be so substantial that a new model is justified, especially since several key concepts are not covered elsewhere. Thus, our model builds on previous ones (just as they build on each other) in order to enhance our understanding of the production, distribution, and consumption of audiobooks in subscription-based streaming services.

Modelling Subscription-based Streaming Services for Books

We propose a conceptual circuit where the streaming service company is placed in the centre. Obviously, this model does not cover the entire book trade. The production, distribution, and consumption of print books fall outside of its scope, as do audiobooks and ebooks sold as entities, as well as libraries, literary agents, and other important actors in the trade. Rather, by placing the streaming service in the middle, we intend to highlight how this

models, and it is only made visible as part of the flow between actors in Colbjørnsen's actor-based network model.²⁹ By contrast, we emphasize the product as a separate part of the model, which enables more in-depth material analyses of literary works (and their linguistic and bibliographic codes) in streaming services.³⁰ Second, we have included the "streaming service platform" as a separate part, situated in between the product database and the hardware device used for consumption. This highlights the importance of interfaces, underlying algorithms, and recommendation systems for book consumption. Third, our model also calls attention to the "performing narrator," as this is a significant part of audiobooks. The model is *not* media specific, as it works for both audiobooks and ebooks, but rather business model specific; that said, it is audiobooks that are primarily consumed through streaming services.

In general, the subscription-based business model for streamed books works as follows. A *streaming service company* provides a *database* of digital *products* (i.e., audiobooks and ebooks). The database consists of titles from *publishers*, *audiobook publishers*,³¹ the streaming service themselves, and possibly also from self-publishing *authors* (the arrows concerning self-publishing are grey in the model as this is yet not common in streaming services in Nordic countries).³² When audiobooks are produced, a *performing narrator* (most often an actor) is hired for the recording. A publisher or self-publisher that wants to make its titles available in the streaming service can either negotiate directly with the streaming service company (mainly an option for larger actors) or go through an *intermediate distributor* (e.g., Bokinfo, Bookwire, Publit, Publizion).³³

The database is accessed through a *platform*, where *consumers* use their smartphone (or tablet, laptop, or another *device*) to seek, browse, choose, and finally consume titles—either as streamed sound files (audiobooks) or text files (ebooks). The platform also provides the option to switch between these formats as you go along. To gain access to the platform, which allows you to consume as many books as you like from the entire database of titles available, you pay a monthly fee to the streaming service company. This is the subscription part of the business model; instead of choosing and paying for specific titles, you subscribe to the entire catalogue. This cost is not permanently fixed, but in May 2021 the price for a standard subscription to Storytel in Sweden was 169 SEK (about 20 USD) a month, and for a

premium account (without limitations on listening time) at BookBeat it was 199 SEK (about 24 USD) a month.³⁴ The pricing levels are low, roughly comparable to buying one hardcover title a month.³⁵

Apart from the price, the attractiveness of the subscription model for consumers is related to the number of titles in the database. The larger the better, and the theoretical ideal is to hold “all books,” or at least all popular and recently published books. In Sweden, the streaming services have succeeded quite well in this respect. While “all titles” are certainly not available,³⁶ all major publishers collaborate with these services, and most new releases that are also produced as audiobooks are included, as well as many titles as ebooks only. Storytel claims that they provide access to 500,000 titles worldwide, while BookBeat offers access to 200,000 titles in Sweden.³⁷

These streaming services can sustain large numbers of available titles paired with low prices for two main reasons. First, the percentage of the revenue that goes back to publishers and authors is lower than for books sold as individual items. This is clearly visible from the fact that subscription-based streaming services in Sweden in 2020 accounted for 57 percent of the “volumes” sold, but only 24 percent of the revenue for publishers.³⁸ Publishers agree to lower rates because subscription-services seem to boost book consumption in general by expanding the total market,³⁹ and because visibility on the lists of subscription services is becoming increasingly important. People now expect new titles to be available on these platforms, which means that not having your titles included on these platforms is a problem, at least for large and mid-sized publishers.⁴⁰

The second reason that streaming service companies can sustain such low rates with such a high volume of titles is that they are frequently supported by venture capital, with the explicit aim of growing as large as possible as fast as possible. Thus, it is not really a problem if they do not generate profit immediately, since their investors believe that they will be very profitable in the future, when they will control large shares of the market and have access to giant customer databases (e.g., Amazon, Google, etc.).⁴¹

Consumption and the Consumption Data Feedback Loop

The latter point connects to an important aspect of streaming services, namely the consumption data created by consumer interaction with these platforms and aggregated by the streaming service company. Datafication is of course a major trend in digital culture and the phenomenon of “tracked reading” can also be observed more broadly, for instance in relation to Amazon’s Kindle.⁴² However, we argue that subscription-based streaming services rely to a larger extent than other book distributors on consumption data, in ways that influence the whole chain of book production, as explained further below.

In our model, the consumption data feedback loop is illustrated by the arrow from the consumer back to the streaming service company. This arrow should thus be read as representing not only a flow of money, but also a flow of data. This data is used by the streaming service company to refine its platform by producing increasingly accurate recommendation algorithms and in other ways customizing the platform design for each individual user. Since the streaming service company owns this data, it can also serve other purposes. It can be used to adjust textual content according to user demand (as discussed further below), and it can be provided to publishers as a part of the payment for making their titles available on the platform. It can also be sold to third parties who seek to reach specific customer segments through advertising. Companies are not yet selling data in this way, but it represents a possible way of generating more profit.

What should be emphasized is that streaming service companies, through this data, know much more about book consumers than publishers and authors do, and more than the literary industry have ever known before. In earlier book circuit models, the loop bites its own tail by connecting readers back with authors (through various kinds of feedback, physical as well as digital).⁴³ While the connection between consumers and authors remains important (and is also accounted for in our model), we argue that the feedback loop from consumers back to the streaming services is *decisive*, and something that is likely to have substantial effects on publishing in years to come. As John B. Thompson notes, in the digital economy it is the distributors that know book consumers the best, not the publishers or the authors.⁴⁴ This discrepancy in terms of knowledge makes the distributor

much more powerful, and puts the distributional aspects at the forefront of contemporary publishing.

In the Storytel app, carefully curated selections of the consumption data are also fed back and presented to the consumers themselves as “statistics.” For instance, the app will tell you which hours of the day and which days of the week you have used it, or which consumer tags have appeared most frequently on the books you have finished on the platform. In this way, Storytel allows the consumer to become aware of (parts of) the machine learning “profile” made by the company of their consumption behaviour. The idea is, arguably, to create an appealing atmosphere of participation as well as self-recognition for the user, as these profiles are framed under suggestive labels such as “*the everyday enjoyer*” (“Vardagsnjutaren”) or “*the day dreamer*” (“Dagdrömmaren”). Showing consumption statistics in a harmless way could also be a strategy by Storytel to forestall potential criticism of their collection and use of the data. Another feature that works in a similar way is the platform’s visualization of the number of other users who are reading or listening to the same title as you are simultaneously. This appeals to consumers who like to be part of a larger reading community. The community aspect is further stressed by the fact that the app features statistics on other users’ recommendations and ratings of the books. Thus, users are encouraged to navigate the app by following the recommendations of other readers and listeners.⁴⁵

The parts of our model that represent user interaction are key, in several ways, to grasping how streaming services affect book consumption. The platform design and its recommendation systems are one important aspect here, as highlighted in previous studies.⁴⁶ Another is the subscription model itself. In the platform it is not only possible to browse books, as in a traditional bookstore or through an internet retailer, but also to start reading any book in order to try it out. This is something very different from carefully choosing a specific title and paying for it. In subscription-based streaming services, then, the bookshop and the private reading couch converge for consumers, which will no doubt affect consumption behaviour.

The third and final point relates to what John B. Thompson labels the *possession value* of books. In streaming services, as in all digital formats, it is

only the actual consumption of literature that matters: there is no real show-off value or cultural prestige in streaming books, apart from what the reading itself gives.⁴⁷ At least not yet. A challenge for streaming services in the future will be to try to boost digital substitutes for the cultural prestige connected to book consumption. The visibility of the user's own statistics is one way of adding value that stays after book completion. Other approaches might include book community-building, in relation to social media obviously, but perhaps also in encouraging book community building directly on the streaming platform.

Streaming Services and Content Production

Streaming services influence not only the relationship between consumers and distributors, but also the actual content. One central aspect of the subscription-based business model is that it allows the streaming service company to bypass external publishers by producing their own content, for their own platform. This option puts the streaming service in a strong position, as it makes them independent of, and therefore less vulnerable to, external actors: it allows each service to create a self-sufficient system for the entire literary process, covering production, distribution, and consumption—to control the entire supply chain through what economic theorists call *vertical integration*.⁴⁸

The two largest streaming services in the Nordic region show that such self-sufficient systems can be achieved in two ways. The largest actor, Storytel, started out as a mere distributor of others' products. When they started to grow, however, they also started to acquire content producers, or publishing houses. So far, Storytel has acquired Swedish Storyside (2013), Norstedts (2016), Lind & Co (2021), Danish People's Press (2017), and Finnish Gummerus (2019). Another model of streaming service for books is exemplified by BookBeat, the second-largest streaming service in the Swedish book market. BookBeat is part of a large publishing company, the Bonnier media conglomerate, and thereby has first-hand access to all titles published by Bonnier publishers. While this model at first glance seems to place the publisher, rather than the service, in control of the production and circulation of books, Bookbeat also distributes books from other publishers and thus holds a position as an independent actor on the market.

Original productions by streaming services for books are often called “born-audio” or “audio-first” content—that is, narratives adjusted specifically for the audiobook format. This emerging category of texts exemplifies how streaming service companies can influence the production process as well the style, genre, and content of the texts produced.⁴⁹ And, as these companies become more dominant in the book market, more “born audio” content is produced—as we are already seeing in the Nordic countries.

In our model, an arrow leads directly from the author to the streaming service, indicating that the streaming service as a content producer collaborates directly with the author. This construction arguably influences the relation between the actors in a rather significant way, and departs from the logic of traditional publishing. Storytel’s born-audio narratives, Storytel Originals, are produced through close collaboration between editors and authors. In their presentation of the Originals brand, the company describes how they use a “writer’s room” approach, stressing collaborative writing, a concept associated with television production.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Storytel, rather than the author, holds the copyright for their original production. The altered status of the author is also highlighted by the centrality of another actor: the performing narrator. In our model, the performing narrator is placed between the streaming service company and the content, reflecting how the narrator works as a crucial mediator of content produced by the streaming service. This, of course, is true of any audiobook production, but the position of the narrator is particularly important in the services’ original productions. On their webpage, directed at potential authors, Storytel emphasizes how the production of the Originals stories actively focuses on matching stories and narrators:

At Storytel, we know from experience that it’s key to connect the right voice to the right story for the right customer... We are experts at matching these three together: we have a lot of data on popular narrators in relation to different types of stories With our Storytel Original publishing process, we [...] optimize stories for narration from the ground up.⁵¹

In order to “optimize” products for the audio format, the streaming service makes use of data on audience behaviour. Storytel producer

Anna Öqvist Ragnar emphasizes that they seek to produce original content that is adjusted to what the listeners want. Data analysis is used to secure this connection:

We haven't made a lot of Originals that are supposed to attract new customers at Storytel. Our data analysis has rather involved saying, "Hm, what are they listening to? Okay, then we will make something similar, only a little bit different."⁵²

Notably, adjusting products to what the listeners want means producing a specific type of texts, targeted toward maintaining listenership on the streaming platform. Ragnar notes that authors are instructed to write according to specific guidelines: the Originals series is characterized by straightforward, dialogue-driven, and plot-centred storytelling.⁵³ On Storytel's webpage, the brand is presented as stories written directly for sound. The webpage further emphasizes that Originals stories should not contain too many metaphors and unnecessary digressions.⁵⁴ The style of the born-audio series, accordingly, reflects how the streaming service and the associated consumption patterns contribute to shaping the style and content of literary texts.

The straightforward style of the Originals series is, however, not specific to born-audio works, but reflects a broader relationship between the audiobook format and popular genre fiction. Genre fiction, and especially crime fiction, is extremely popular on these platforms.⁵⁵ Moreover, moving beyond the question of genre, a recent study has detected notable differences in style between works that are bestsellers in print format and the most popular audiobooks on Storytel. These results give us reason to talk about specific *audiobook stylistics*, where books that are popular in audiobook format on streaming service platforms are shorter, more straightforwardly written, and appear to highlight plot and dialogue than books that are popular in print format.⁵⁶ Thus, the streaming audiobook format arguably influences which styles and modes of storytelling become popular.

Streaming services also focus on serialized content. As examined by Linkis and Pennlert, the serial format is used strategically by subscription-based streaming services to keep listeners on the platform. In a 2018 report from

Storytel, the service's analysts note that the serial format has proved efficient in securing "consistent and recurrent" consumption in a modern entertainment industry marked by fierce competition.⁵⁷ Notably, Storytel is competing not only with other distributors of books, but also with distributors of other content, including other streaming services such as Netflix, for television series and movies, or Spotify, for music and podcasts. Their use of the serial format reflects how this orientation influences the narrative content of the texts they produce, as they are imitating other serial media, including television series and podcasts. The boundary between podcasts and audiobooks is blurring, and the Storytel Originals format, especially, may be seen as an attempt to attract a podcast audience, offering stories that include sound effects and music to a larger extent than other audiobooks.⁵⁸ The presentation of the Originals stories in "episodes" and "seasons" also reflects an orientation towards a television series audience. Anna Öqvist Ragnar acknowledged that Storytel is imitating the format of the streamed television series, but she also noted that this strategy has its limitations. When they launched the Originals brand in 2016, Storytel would present an Originals season in ten separate episodes. By 2021, they had shifted in most of their markets to publishing each season as one audio file of 9–10 hours, thus returning to a traditional average audiobook length. Ragnar comments on this decision:

The episodic format has proved harder to implement than we thought it would be. My hypothesis from the beginning was that the episodic format functions very well in television series ... People are used to it. You don't have to promise to be listening for ten hours straight but can just try for an hour. And it is very possible that people do that, but the problem is that then, they jump off, they kind of get nine chances to jump off the series. ... The competition is too fierce for us to allow that anymore. So now, we just want to get them going and not give them any chances to jump off.⁵⁹

Rather than keeping listeners on the platform, then, Ragnar believes that the ten-episode format involves a risk that people will abandon the series between episodes. This is because audiobooks are consumed in different ways and with different expectations than television series. While Storytel and other streaming services may imitate trends in television production and

other media industries they still have to adjust production for a reading audience that is accustomed to long formats. Original productions might challenge our understanding of the audiobook as a remediation of the printed book. Yet streamed audiobooks are still primarily defined by and closely connected to traditional book culture.⁶⁰

Bibliographic Codes in Streaming Services

A final aspect of our model is that it enables forward-looking analyses of the bibliographic codes and material aspects of literary works by capturing the intersections between “books” (as objects) and book distribution in streaming services. The “product (audiobooks and ebooks)” box in the model is an obvious starting point, and a crucial part of any book analysis, but in line with McGann and others who emphasize the material aspects of literary works,⁶¹ a complete analysis of “books” as material objects in streaming services should also cover the streaming service platform and the hardware device used for consumption.⁶² The app design and its functionality is arguably the more important of the two, but hardware devices matter. Literary works look slightly different depending on whether they are consumed on a smartphone, a tablet, or a laptop. Even more significantly, audiobooks are consumed as sound through headphones or speakers, via the mediation of a performing narrator, while the reader interacts with ebooks through a touchscreen or a screen. These material differences between books-as-audio and books-as-text are key to understanding both the similarities and the differences between consumption of audiobooks and ebooks through streaming services.

When books are distributed through streaming services, accordingly, the book as it is produced by the publisher is not the same object as the one that the end consumers receive on the streaming service platform. Rather, its bibliographic codes are a mutual creation of the publishers and the streaming service platform.

Indeed, both the streaming service platform and the hardware device are part of the distribution of streamed books. The distribution of streamed books covers all the steps from the publish-ready product to when the (mediated) text reaches the consumers’ eyes and ears, that is: integration in the streaming service database, potentially via an intermediate distributor,

visibility on the (software) platform, and concrete access through a (hardware) device. Our model makes it clear that it is hard to separate material books as objects from their distribution, when it comes to streaming services; books and book distribution have in some respects converged into indistinct, overlapping categories.

When we are analyzing literary works in streaming services, McGann's "linguistic codes" are found in the "Product (audiobooks and ebooks)" category, while the "bibliographic codes" are found in several places: "performing narrator" (for audiobooks), "Product (audiobooks and ebooks)," "Streaming service platform," and "Device for consumption."⁶³ McGann's concept of bibliographic codes thus works quite well within our model, then, as a tool for analyzing the materiality of texts distributed through streaming services—though one could raise objections about whether aspects such as app design and recommendation system output should really be understood as parts of literary works per se. In any case, what our model visualizes is a power shift surrounding the bibliographic codes where streaming services are concerned. For print books, the bibliographic code is determined entirely by the publisher. For digital books sold as entities, it is determined mostly by the publisher, although the software and hardware have the potential to make changes in some respects. In streaming services, however, the material reading frame is arguably decided more by the streaming service itself (i.e., the distributor) than by the publisher. Additionally, the consumer is able to affect the bibliographic code of a given text as they interact with it, for example by choosing to speed up the pace of the narration.

Genette's distinction between peritext and epitext is more difficult to apply to streaming services.⁶⁴ In one respect, all the information that is brought along a digital work when it is published (i.e., title, cover, author presentation, book presentation, performed narration) could be considered peritexts, but when this information is transferred into the streaming service platform a lot of typically epitextual information gets blended with it and presented in the "peritextual space" for each book. For instance, when you click a title in the Storytel app to read more about it, you get all the publisher's peritexts above, but also things such as average ratings by Storytel users, user reviews, users' top tag categories, and recommendations of similar titles based on machine learning algorithms based on

consumption data: in other words, something that in accordance with Genette's terminology could be labelled "the distributor's peritext."⁶⁵

Books sold through online retailing websites also appear at first alongside ratings and tags and other similar features. The big difference with streaming services is that the consumer only ever interacts with the literary work through platform, which means that the books are never visible without this added information (as print books and downloaded ebooks and audiobooks are). If we want to talk about peritexts in streaming services, we need to understand that this category is a compilation of information from the publisher, the distributor, and other readers (with the reader data provided indirectly, filtered through the streaming service algorithms), which leads far away from Genette's original understanding of the peritext. If, like McGann, we believe that bibliographic codes should be seen as an important part of the literary work, then we must also acknowledge that platform design and other aspects of the distributional frame shape the outcome of the literary work itself.

It is thus possible to analyze the bibliographic codes and material aspects of literary works in streaming services, as long as one is aware of the fact that the streaming service company plays a pivotal role in determining how the end user will interact with the book, and thus how its material dimensions will contribute to its meaning.

Conclusions

Subscription-based streaming services, driven by the popularity of the audiobook format, have had and will continue to have a marked impact on book markets around the world. The influence of their rapid rise in the Nordic countries, and Sweden in particular, has already been felt in that region, which might be slightly ahead of the curve in the global trend toward the digitization of the publishing industry. In this paper, we have analyzed how such streaming services operate. By proposing a model to conceptualize subscription-based streaming services for books, we account for ongoing developments in the production, distribution, and consumption of literature. These alterations are affecting contemporary book culture at its core.

While most previous scholarly models of the book trade are circuits, focusing on the circulation of communication and content from one actor to another, our model reflects a structure with a clear centre: the streaming service company. Using this model as a tool accordingly makes it possible to study how the increasing centrality of subscription-based streaming services in the contemporary book market complicates and transforms established concepts and power relations in publishing at all levels.

With regard to consumption, the model makes it possible to study the feedback loops and new forms of interaction between distributor and consumer (via the device). In the age of streaming, to read is also to be read, and, as in many parts of our digital culture, data on book consumption behaviour is collected and analyzed by the streaming service company.

With regard to production, the model visualizes how the relationships between authors, publishers, and distributors are altered when streaming services are involved, as the streaming service itself may act as producer of original content as well as distributor. This transforms the conditions for literary production, shifting the power concerning who produces, controls, and owns the text. Shifting focus to the product itself, the boom in streamed audiobooks on the Nordic book market affects which kinds of books get consumed and, arguably, which books get produced in the first place.

Finally, with regard to distribution, the model highlights that distributional aspects are both more complex and more important when it comes to streaming services than they are in traditional book retailing. Where books previously could be understood as finished products (print or digital) that were distributed to an audience, streaming services not only distribute books, but also shape their bibliographic codes as they do so. In a streaming service, the distributional frame and the final product are the same thing; book consumption in streaming services starts and ends on these platforms.

By capturing the intersections between the consumption and distribution of books, the model furthermore makes it possible to study the bibliographic codes and material aspects of literary works in streaming services. Thus, we argue, it is possible to understand works of literature in digital streaming services as ontologically unstable per se, since the distributional and

consumptional aspects of books are increasingly converging on these platforms. There is no longer any real material difference between seeing a book, “buying” a book (or rather: choosing a book for consumption), consuming a book, and switching the format of consumption. What separates those activities is only a click or two within the same digital platform. This aspect, especially, demonstrates the relevance of the model for studies in book culture and materialist textual analysis. By creating a model of the book circuit that applies McGann’s concept of bibliographic codes to streaming services, it is possible to see how streaming services influence not only modes of book consumption, production, and distribution, but also the very constitution of books in our contemporary digital culture.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICES

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Notes

¹ Erik Wikberg, *Bokförsäljningsstatistiken: Helåret 2020* (Stockholm: Svenska Förläggareföreningen, 2021), 23–24. Digital book consumption in 2020 might have been boosted by Covid-19, but the rise of streaming services was already apparent in pre-pandemic Sweden. In 2019, for instance, the corresponding market share of streaming services were 48% of the volumes sold and 21% of the income (ibid., 20, 24).

² Karl Berglund, “Introducing the Beststreamer: Mapping Nuances in Digital Book Consumption at Scale,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 37 (2021).

³ See for example Matthew Rubery, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Iben Have and Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen, *Digital Audiobooks: New Media, Users, and Experiences* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁴ See, for instance, the chapter “The New Orality” in John B. Thompson, *Book Wars: The Digital Revolution in Publishing* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021), 349–93.

⁵ Thompson, *Book Wars*, 348; for a full account of subscription-based business models for books see the chapter “Bookflix,” 319–49.

⁶ Rubery, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book*.

⁷ Have and Stougaard Pedersen, *Digital Audiobooks*.

⁸ Iben Have and Mille Raaby Jensen, “Audio-bingeing,” *Passage* 83 (Summer 2020); Sara Tanderup Linkis and Julia Pennlert, “Episodic Listening: Analyzing the Content and Usage of Born-Audio Serial Narratives,” *Journal of Electronic Publishing* 23, no. 1 (2020). For further studies on the multimodal aspects of born-audio literature, see also Sara Tanderup Linkis, “Resonant Listening,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 47, no. 4 (2020), and Sara Tanderup Linkis, “Reading Spaces: Original Audiobooks and Mobile Listening,” *SoundEffects* 10, no. 1 (2021).

⁹ Karl Berglund and Mats Dahllöf, “Audiobook Stylistics: Book Format Comparisons Between Print and Audio in the Bestselling Segment,” *Journal of Cultural Analytics* 6, no. 3 (2021).

¹⁰ Elisa Tattersall Wallin and Jan Nolin, “Time to Read: Exploring the Timespaces of Subscription-Based Audiobooks,” *New Media & Society* 22, no. 3 (2020); Berglund, “Introducing the Beststreamer”; Berglund, “Strömmande bästsäljare.”

¹¹ Karl Berglund and Ann Steiner, “Is Backlist the New Frontlist? Large-Scale Data Analysis of Bestseller Book Consumption in Streaming Services,” *LOGOS: Journal of the World Publishing Community* 32, no. 1 (2021).

¹² Terje Colbjørnsen, “The Streaming Network: Conceptualizing Distribution Economy, Technology, and Power in Streaming Media Services,” *Convergence* (October 2020); Iben Have and Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen, “The Audiobook Circuit in Digital Publishing: Voicing the Silent Revolution,” *New Media & Society* 22, no. 3 (2020); Elisa Tattersall Wallin, “Reading By Listening: Conceptualising Audiobook Practices in the Age of Streaming Subscription Services,” *Journal of Documentation* 77, no. 2 (2020).

¹³ Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

¹⁴ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 [orig. 1987]). Genette further separates the paratext into two categories according to how close they are positioned toward the literary text: peritexts are paratexts found within the same volume as the literary text (e.g., book covers, typography, forewords, etc.), whereas epitexts are all paratexts found elsewhere (e.g. ads for books, author presentations, etc.) (Genette, *Paratexts*, 1–12). These two layers of the paratext are impossible to separate entirely, as parts of the peritext (for instance the cover) are often used in advertising. In a digital world, this demarcation is increasingly difficult to draw, and might even be considered an artificial construct. (See Nadine Desrochers and Daniel Apollon, “Introduction,” in *Examining Paratextual Theory and its Applications in Digital Cultures*, eds. Nadine Desrochers and Daniel Apollon (Hershey: IGI Global, 2014).

¹⁵ McGann emphasizes that authors and publishers together create and authorize both the linguistic and the bibliographic codes, but that—generally—authors have more control over the former and publishers more over the latter (McGann, *The Textual Condition*, 66–67). Genette acknowledges that publishers control things such as paper quality, format, book cover design, etc.—he labels these things “the publisher’s peritext”—but he is himself apparently not that interested in these material aspects of books (Genette, *Paratexts*, 16, 347).

¹⁶ For overviews of such research, see for example Matthew Kirschenbaum and Sarah Werner, “Digital Scholarship and Digital Studies: The State of the Discipline,” *Book History* 17 (2014); Rachel Noorda and Stevie Marsden, “Twenty-First Century Book Studies: The State of the Discipline,” *Book History* 22 (2019); Berglund, “Introducing the Beststreamer”.

¹⁷ See for example Ann Steiner, “The Global Book: Micropublishing, Conglomerate Production, and Digital Market Structures,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 34 (2018); Murray, “Secret Agents”; Berglund and Steiner, “Is Backlist the New Frontlist?”; Thompson, *Book Wars*, 176–94.

¹⁸ See Berglund, “Introducing the Beststreamer”; Thompson, *Book Wars*: 43–48.

¹⁹ Tattersall Wallin, “Reading By Listening: Conceptualising Audiobook Practices in the Age of Streaming Subscription Services,” *Journal of Documentation* 77, no. 2 (2020).

²⁰ See for instance Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982); Robert Darnton, “The First Steps Toward a History of Reading,” *Australian Journal of French Studies* 51, no. 2–3 (1986); Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996).

²¹ Dario Llinares, Neil Fox, and Richard Berry, eds., *Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

²² See for example Michael Bull, *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2007). For further discussion of audiobook consumption in this context, see also Tanderup Linkis, “Reading Spaces.”

²³ Robert Darnton, “What Is the History of Books?,” *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (1982); Lars Furuland, “Litteratur och samhälle: Om litteratursociologin och dess forskningsfält,” in *Litteratursociologi: Texter om litteratur och samhälle*, eds. Lars Furuland and Johan Svedjedal (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1997); Hans Hertel, *500.000 £, er prisen: Bogen i mediesymbiosens tid* (Stockholm: Svenska Bokförläggareföreningen, 1996); Johan Svedjedal, *The Literary Web: Literature and Publishing in the Age of Digital Production* (Stockholm: Kungl. biblioteket, 2000): 114–32; Claire Squires and Padmini Ray Murray, “The Digital Publishing Communications Circuit,” *Book 2.0* 3, no. 1 (2013).

²⁴ Have and Stougaard Pedersen, “The Audiobook Circuit”; Tattersall Wallin, “Reading by Listening.”

²⁵ Colbjørnsen, “The Streaming Network.”

²⁶ Colbjørnsen, “The Streaming Network.”

²⁷ See Squires and Ray Murray, “The Digital Publishing Communications Circuit”; Darnton, “What is the History of Books?”.

²⁸ Have and Stougaard Pedersen, “The Audiobook Circuit.”

²⁹ Have and Stougaard Pedersen, “The Audiobook Circuit”; Colbjørnsen, “The Streaming Network.”

³⁰ “Product” is a term in the model that can be debated. It is related to *content*, which is a term frequently used in the publishing industry. However, “content” is a rather vague concept in constant flux, whereas the “product” is more fixed; it is the content in its publishing-ready form, if you will. In fact, the arrows in the model visualize how content circulates between actors and changes along the way—manuscripts are edited, technical formats are decided, and so on. Using the nomenclature of textual criticism, the “product” might instead be understood as a category similar to the *work* in its representation as *text*, and in two different *versions* (i.e., ebooks and audiobooks). For a thorough explanation of the nomenclature of textual criticism in a digital context, see Anna Gunder, “Hyperworks: On Digital Literature and Computer Games” (PhD dissertation, Uppsala University, 2004): 155–94. Although these terms have their theoretical advantages, we have chosen to stick with the less abstract term “product,” as it, we argue, manages to capture what is at stake in the streaming service business model.

³¹ Independent *ebook publishers* could also have been highlighted in the model. Because most publishers produce their own ebooks, and because audiobooks are so dominant in the Nordic streaming services for books, we have chosen to not do this, but instead to keep a simplified model.

³² This is a major difference from the American subscription-based platforms Scribd and Kindle Unlimited, which both rely heavily on self-published ebooks (see Thompson, *Book Wars*, 319–48).

³³ Publishers may also use an intermediate distributor for the distribution of titles, while still having a direct agreement with the streaming service.

³⁴ Storytel, “Storytel,” <https://www.storytel.com/se/sv/> (accessed May 5, 2021); BookBeat, “BookBeat,” <https://www.bookbeat.se/> (accessed May 5, 2021).

³⁵ As others have noted, the pricing levels might be a reason to regard digital streaming services as a new low-cost format for books. See Johan Svedjedal, “Läsning och lyssning i en mångmedial tid,” in Anna Nordlund and Johan Svedjedal, *Läsandets årsringar: Rapport och reflektioner om läsningens aktuella tillstånd i Sverige* (Stockholm: Svenska Förläggareföreningen, 2020): 20–23; Berglund, “Introducing the Beststreamer”.

³⁶ For a map of the availability of classics and prestige fiction in Swedish streaming services, see Jerry Määttä, “Kvalitetslitteraturen i luren: Utbudet av Nobelpristagare och Augustnominerad skönlitteratur som strömmande svenska ljudböcker,” in *Från Strindberg till Storytel — korskopplingar mellan ljud och litteratur*, eds. Julia Pennlert and Lars Ilshammar (Göteborg: Daidalos, 2021).

³⁷ Storytel, “Om Storytel,” <https://www.storytel.com/se/sv/om-storytel> (accessed May 5, 2021); BookBeat, “BookBeat.”

³⁸ Wikberg, *Bokförsäljningsstatistiken*, 23–24. A “sold volume” is obviously a problematic concept in subscription-based streaming services, since de facto no separate volumes are being sold. To enable comparisons between book sales and streams, however, the official statistics count books that have been streamed through to around 80–90 percent by a user as a “sold volume”. (The span is explained by that the three streaming services use slightly different operationalizations of “sold volumes”.)

³⁹ Wikberg, *Bokförsäljningsstatistiken*, 21–26.

⁴⁰ See John Thompson’s description of American publishers’ dependence on being available through Amazon as a “Faustian pact” (Thompson, *Book Wars*: 437–40).

⁴¹ See Thompson, *Book Wars*: 445–48.

⁴² See Whitney Trettien, “Tracked,” in *Further Reading*, eds. Matthew Rubery and Leah Price (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 311–24.

⁴³ Darnton, “What is the History of the Book?”; Squires and Ray Murray, “The Digital Publishing Communication Circuit”; Have and Stougaard Pedersen, “The Audiobook Circuit.”

⁴⁴ Thompson, *Book Wars*: 172–74.

⁴⁵ It is also likely that publishers make use of such user feedback when they are producing audiobooks.

⁴⁶ See for example Ann Steiner, “The Global Book”; Murray, “Secret Agents”; Berglund and Steiner, “Is Backlist the New Frontlist?”; Thompson, *Book Wars*, 176–94.

⁴⁷ Thompson, *Book Wars*: 43–48; see also Berglund, “Introducing the Beststreamer.”

⁴⁸ For a discussion on vertical integration in relation to publishing, see Anna-Maria Rimm, “Conditions and Survival: Views on the Concentration of Ownership and Vertical Integration in German and Swedish Publishing,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 30 (2014).

⁴⁹ The original audio format does exist outside of the Nordic context: a central international actor, Amazon’s Audible, has for instance launched their audio-first brand, Audible Originals. However, as Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen explains, Audible Originals does not adjust content to the audiobook format in the same way that the Nordic actors do (Stougaard Pedersen, “At skrive gennem lyd”).

⁵⁰ Have and Jensen, “Audio-bingeing.”

⁵¹ Storytel, “Storytel Original,” <https://publishing.storytel.com/storytel-original/>, 2021.

⁵² Anna Öqvist Ragnar, interview with Karl Berglund, 28 January 2021. Translated from Swedish.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Mofibo support, “Storytel Originals,” [Mofibo.dk](https://mofibo.dk), 2021.

⁵⁵ Berglund, “Introducing the Beststreamer.”

⁵⁶ Berglund & Dahllöf, “Audiobook Stylistics.”

⁵⁷ Anderson, Porter. “Storytel in Spain.” *Publishing Perspectives* (6 June 2018).

⁵⁸ Notably, this merging of media boundaries is also reflected at the level of distribution, as Storytel offers podcasts as well as audiobooks. Furthermore, major streaming services for music and podcasts such as Spotify and Soundcloud are beginning to distribute audiobooks, and in May 2021, Storytel entered a partnership with Spotify which would make it possible for Storytel subscribers to listen to audiobooks via Spotify’s platform. On streaming as a cross-industry tendency, see also Vilde Sundet and Terje Colbjørnson “Streaming across industries: Streaming logics and streaming lore across the music, film, television, and book industries.” *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research* 37, no. 70 (2021): 12–31.

⁵⁹ Öqvist Ragnar, interview.

⁶⁰ This conclusion support Sundet and Colbjørnson’s observation that “while informants across industries ... emphasize the need to learn from other industries, solutions to challenges are typically sought within industry-specific frames” and that even if streaming is a cross-industrial trend, strategies are based on industry-specific logics and notions. Sundet and Colbjørnson. “Streaming across industries,” 12.

⁶¹ See McGann, *The Textual Condition*; see also Genette, *Paratexts*.

⁶² We here argue in line with, for example, Anna Gunder, Matthew Kirschenbaum, and N. Katherine Hayles, who emphasize the materiality of electronic/digital texts, and, accordingly, the relevance of a bibliographic approach to them. See Gunder, “Hyperworks”: 81–118; Matthew Kirschenbaum, “Materiality and Matter and Stuff: What

Electronic Texts are Made of,” *Electronic Book Review* (October 2001); N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008). With a strict bibliographic approach, however, the term *book* is understood as the *physical text bearer*, which in the context of streaming services equals the hardware device, most often a smartphone (see Gunder, “Hyperworks,” 98–111).

⁶³ McGann, *The Textual Condition*, 60–67.

⁶⁴ Genette, *Paratexts*, 1–12.

⁶⁵ Genette, *Paratexts*, 16, 347.

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