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Q&A WITH PUBLISHER, GREG ALBERS

What is 'networked publishing'?

Networked publishing is just traditional publishing for the digital, communal age. Like a traditional publisher, we acquire books, we edit them, design them, promote, market and distribute them. The difference is in our definition of “we”. Rather than the corporate “we” of a traditional publishing house, our “we” is actually the community. Networked publishing puts the power of acquisition, development and promotion in the hands of our community of users.

What are the benefits of Hol's networked publishing over traditional publishing?

I think it boils down to access, control, and reward. We offer greater access to the publishing process to a wider range of people, We give those people more control over the scope of their work, and the direction that it takes here at Hol. And because everyone owns a percentage of their book's sales, we offer team members a sustained reward that's better tied to the effort and expertise they bring to their book.

I also think the opportunity for people to come together around the common goal of publishing a book is a powerful one. Whether well established or just getting started, Hol offers authors and publishing professionals a chance to connect with one another and expand both their experience and their network.

Why books on art?

First and foremost, it was a personal decision. I realized some time ago that while I loved art, and I loved books, I didn't really love art books. This was a strange thought, but because of obtuse writing or obese design, most art books aren't all that fun to actually read. As an art *and* book lover, I wanted art books to read, not just to look at.

Second, I believe fundamentally that much like publishing, Art should be open, accessible and interpretable to all. If in their reading, our books can meaningfully engage people with the subject in an entertaining or educational way, I think that will translate to a better engagement with works of art.

Lastly, and luckily, it also turns out that there aren't any publishers dedicated exclusively to writing on art. So it was a market niche we could fill, and one that I'm confident will prove valued. There's a tremendous crossover between book readers and visual arts lovers, myself included.

If all content is proposed, edited, designed and publicized by individual teams, what role does Hol play in the publishing process?

The individual teams handle everything that is specific and unique to their book: the editing of its content, the design of its cover, and its promotion to the perfect niche audience. Hol handles everything that can be batched across all our books: layout, production, printing, marketing and sales to booksellers, wholesalers and museum stores, as well as distribution and fulfillment.

We also, importantly, cover all the costs along the way.

If, as you've said, anyone can come to Hol to make their book, how do you ensure the quality of the project?

While anyone can come to Hol, not everyone is going to get through the process. There are several steps along the way that are designed to filter the good from the bad.

First, team selection: Every book must have an experienced team of four to five people who work on the project in exchange for a percentage of the book's ultimate sales. If the book doesn't sell, they won't get paid. So when a team member joins it's because they believe the book is good enough to sell and make money for them, or that it's good enough to be a part of regardless of its potential sales. Either way, each team member's personal investment is an important vote of confidence in a project.

Next, community selection: Once a team has formed, they put together a fairly comprehensive book proposal. That proposal is distributed and reviewed by other teams already publishing books with Hol. This is the final step—if teams who are already publishing books with us applaud a proposal and want that proposed book to be part of the Hol list (along with their own book), we do it.

Much of the conversation concerning "the future of publishing" focuses on changes in production and distribution. Hol's model focuses largely on changes in the creative process. Why?

Publishers see themselves as creators and distributors of things. "We make and sell books." So, when a company that thinks of itself in this way decides it wants to innovate, its first thought is, "How can I make and sell books *differently*?" This is important—e-books and online sales are gaining traction hourly—but it's only the end of the chain. Rather than focus solely on the end, we're interested in the process leading up to it, and in the people that make that process happen. That's where we're trying to innovate.

It goes without saying that we've seen a massive upswell of so-called "user generated content" in just the past few years. Individuals are making and distributing creative work at an unprecedented scale. To continue thinking that you can control what gets shown and in what form, is a mistake. And yet, by focusing on new ways to manufacture the material they're acquiring, that's exactly what many book publishers are doing. They're continuing to act as gatekeepers to content instead of facilitators of it.