

The publishing industry is thriving; now let's cut down on waste

Millions of (often very good) new books are pulped each year - because of marketing failures, and other factors beyond authors' and publishers' control. Maddyness spoke to Aasha Chauhan, cofounder of A Box of Stories, an innovative solution to this ecological and financial problem.

Temps de lecture : minute

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A Box of Stories is an AI backed subscription platform that helps book lovers discover books and save them from being lost forever; it's dedicated to exposing adventurous readers to the 83% of books that don't make bestseller lists. In this interview, cofounder Aasha discusses using digital strategy skills developed at her own digital content agency for the likes of Coca-Cola, the strength of A Box of Stories' community and using data and AI to maximise user experience.

[Maddyness] How did your past business and life experience lead you to creating A Box of Stories?

[Aasha] Our expertise has been in building creative ideas that help solve business problems. That is what my co-founder Dhru Bonnerjee and I did in the past as digital strategy and content solutions entrepreneurs for some of the leading brands in the world, like Coca-Cola, Disney, Cadbury, CNBC and others.

The problem of these books in millions going to pulp every year in the UK was a problem we just couldn't walk away from. We discovered this when a publisher friend mentioned he was off to pulp half a million books - and this was just for one financial quarter! We just couldn't believe that so many books didn't sell, and knew that just because they weren't selling it didn't mean they weren't amazing.

There was a strong temptation to bundle these books and sell them for 3 for £5 like you see across so many websites. We felt there was a good story there and that it was a mission book lovers might get behind. We built some code that scraped user reviews from across the internet and it proved that our gut feeling was indeed right. Many of these titles had very positive reviews, but had been read by tens of thousands rather than millions.

They just didn't get the marketing firepower they needed. So, we got to work as a new-age digital agency again. Except this time we were building a product for ourselves.



Who is your target market?

A Box of Stories is a solution for adventurous book readers who want to

discover new books and authors, but are overwhelmed by the options in bookstores online or offline. We take that pressure off them by introducing them to four amazing books curated by us and rated positively by other book readers across the internet.

I say adventurous because ordering a random selection of books requires a certain sense of adventure. Not that our shoppers get nervous about what they'll receive; every time the box arrives, they say it feels like Christmas!

The other thing all our shoppers talk about is how our boxes help them expand their reading horizons beyond the genres and authors they've chosen themselves. Our readers - and in case you think there must just be a handful of them, we have 20 million in the UK! - read more than 50 books a year.

Have you benefited from any accelerators/incubators and can you share your experiences, good and bad?

We were a part of Founders Factory London's 2019 cohort and found the entire experience to be revolutionary for our business. They were incredibly helpful in terms of providing us with direct support and access to individuals with a depth of knowledge and expertise that it would have taken us years to internalise.

We were able to learn from their focused programmes, bounce ideas and engage in a meaningful way with the mentors and other companies that were a part of the programme. Even now they continue to provide us with advice and guidance, helping focus our long term strategy and address shorter-term problems as they come up, whether that's in marketing, operations or customer success.

In fact, our performance at Founders Factory has been turned into a case study that you can read [here](#).

Do you feel like you have an established community, and if so how have you built and maintained it?

By far the thing we are most proud of, and most protective of, is our thriving community. Driven by our mission to save brand new books, and bonded by a love for discovering amazing books by unknown authors, our readers keep us going with their constant input and fair criticism of our every move.

They engage with us across a multitude of channels, and with each other on our constantly buzzing [private online book group](#). While we invite our customers to join in, we can't really take credit for keeping it alive as they do such a wonderful job by themselves, excitedly sharing their 'to read' piles of books and recommending new and exciting reads for other members of the community.

There's Kindles, and there's libraries full of hardbacks. You are somewhere in the middle. How have you used tech and AI to disrupt a very traditional model and industry?

While we are incredibly reliant on technology

to run the business, with it underpinning everything from book selection to customer success, A Box of Stories is still very much a book in hand business.

There is a certain romanticism around holding a story in your hand, going through the pages, popping in a bookmark and that incomparable feeling when you finally read the last page.

Digital books have certainly been a success story, but paper books aren't going anywhere anytime soon.

Having said that, time is an increasingly limited resource and readers that want to experience new genres and stories don't always have the ability to discover new titles outside of the bestsellers - especially if they want to expand their horizons while being assured what they find will be worth the time spent reading it.

Our platform sifts through the thousands of titles that didn't get mass exposure and helps identify boxes and genres that will resonate with our community. We learn from feedback and continuously update our recommendation engine. Over 95% of our readers have not heard of the books they get sent - and because of this we've been showcased as a case study for our referral platform.

How are things going for the

books/publishing industry at the moment and what's in store for the future?

Publishers are doing really well. Print is doing better than expected; audiobooks are skyrocketing; romance, murder mystery and social-emotional learning are super hot genres, and diversity, equality and inclusion is also a burning topic. Immersive books are starting to come out. 2 of the Big 6 publishers are currently up for sale.

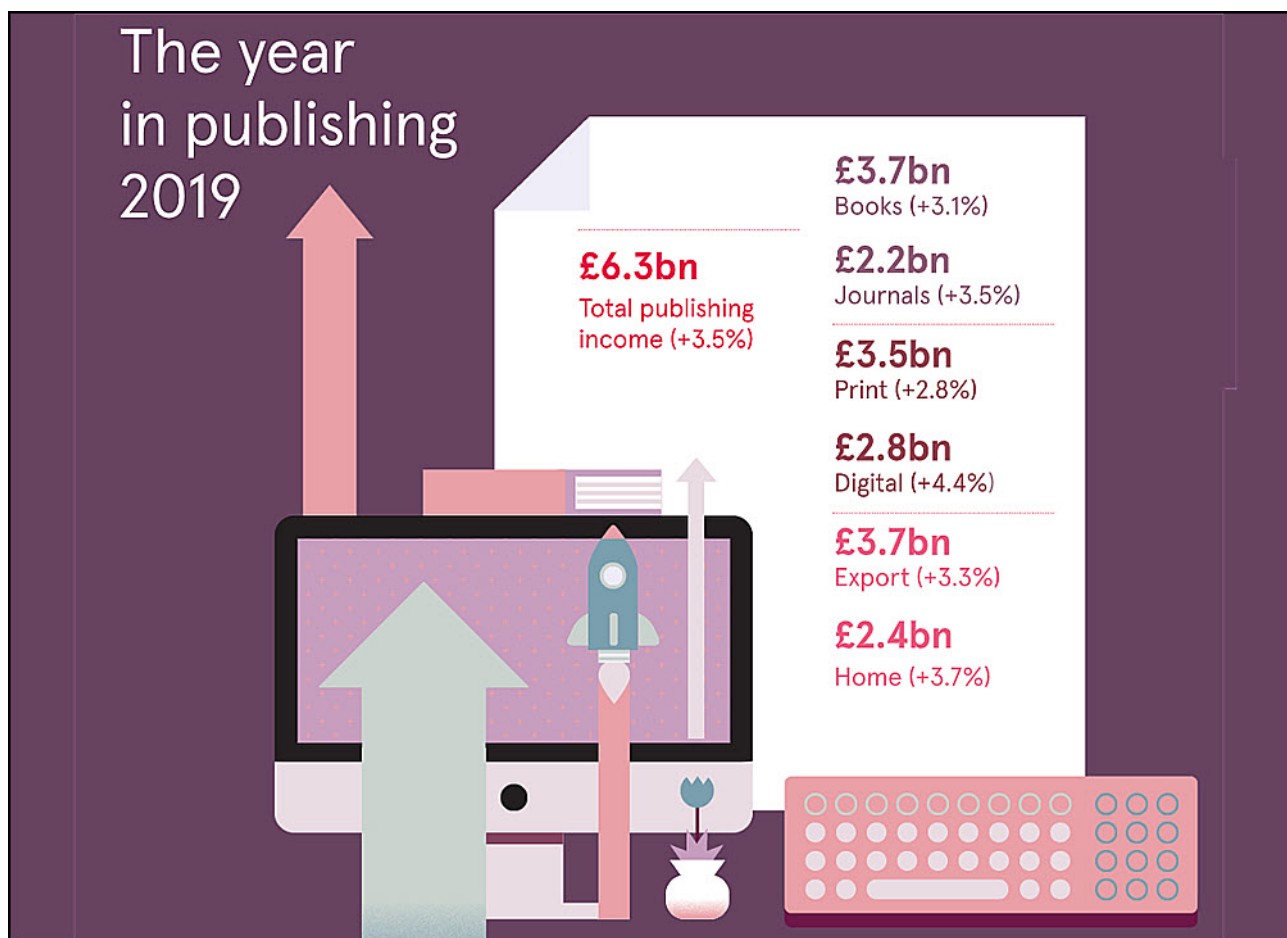


Table 1.13a Export sales of print & digital books: top 15 countries (net invoiced value)

	Total			Print			Digital		
	2018	2019	2019/18	2018	2019	2019/18	2018	2019	2019/18
	£m	£m	% chg	£m	£m	% chg	£m	£m	% chg
United States	186	189	+1.4	127	120	-5.7	60	69	+16.4
Australia	180	174	-3.2	129	121	-6.0	51	53	+4.1
Germany	123	104	-15.5	107	87	-18.2	16	16	+2.5
UAE	64	68	+6.5	55	55	+1.2	9	13	+37.5
India	61	62	+2.0	54	56	+1.9	6	7	+3.6
Spain	45	61	+35.2	42	57	+37.3	4	4	+10.5
China	63	61	-4.3	52	49	-5.8	12	12	+2.3
Netherlands	49	55	+12.1	43	48	+12.1	6	7	+12.4
Saudi Arabia	49	49	+0.2	44	43	-3.4	5	6	+33.5
South Africa	44	39	-11.5	35	31	-13.1	8	8	-4.8
Mexico	33	36	+10.9	31	35	+10.2	1	1	+30.5
Irish Republic	31	36	+15.0	23	28	+18.9	8	8	+3.7
Japan	35	33	-3.7	31	30	-3.8	3	3	-3.1
Singapore	32	33	+5.5	29	31	+6.7	3	3	-7.0
France	35	30	-14.5	30	24	-18.5	6	6	+6.5
Other	570	610	+6.9	485	519	+7.0	86	91	+6.4
TOTAL	1600	1640	+2.5	1317	1333	+1.2	283	307	+8.8

NB: % changes calculated prior to rounding * = < £0.5m

How has COVID affected your business? What have been the challenges and the silver linings?

COVID gave us an overnight spike in sales that has ended up lasting seven or eight months. I remember there was a memo floated by one of our investors on best practices. It included shutting down all marketing spend and digging deep for the long haul. Basically just surviving until 2021. We almost temporarily let go of our digital agency. Since then, it's been a rollercoaster ride that no one could have warned us about!

It has been extremely challenging. It feels like we're speeding down the highway at breakneck speed with no idea about how long the ride will last or the obstacles we'll come up against!

We've been through stretched operations, 100% remote working from 2 countries, hiring people we've still not met face to face and constantly worrying about the survival of our warehouse and fulfilment partners - and the mental wellbeing of the team.

The upside of course is the morale of the team and our partners who are so proud of the business and the way we've grown together. A big motivator for us is the acknowledgement we get from our readers. It's an amazing feeling knowing the books we deliver take our readers into an imaginary world far away from the problems of lockdown. We get to save hundreds of thousands of books, directly impacting the happiness of readers - and we run a successful business. It's a dream job.

Tell us about how you've integrated environmental sustainability into your business model.

77 million books were pulped in the UK in 2018, and this number is only rising.

Because of a combination of factors, a number of fascinating titles, which publishers had every right to believe would take off, fail to meet expectations.

Inevitably these books are then destined to be destroyed even in their brand new, never-been-read state, resulting in a hit to the environment but also the loss of all these unheard stories.

We have made it our mission to give every book the chance to be

discovered, scanning every title we can get our hands on and pulling out the best that we can to share with our socially conscious yet adventurous readership. Our desire to save these books is the founding principle of A Box of Stories, and underpins all of our other actions, including the material we use for packaging and how we communicate with our community.

What's your favourite book and why?

I am a sucker for modern history and I have many favourites.

We've started asking everyone we interview about their daily routine and the rules they live by. Is it up at 4am for yoga, or something a little more traditional?

I am somewhere in between the early risers and late workers. I enjoy working in spurts with downtime and workouts thrown in the middle, rather than a long stretch of work. My unbreakable rule is my daily to-do list.

[Discover A Box of Stories](#)

Article by Aasha Chauhan