



Publisher: Chelsea Green

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Long Tails, Short Tails, and the Challenges of Activist Publishing

Reaching the Masses while Remaining Timely

The great Scottish-born philosopher David Hume published his major work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in 1739, at the tender age of 29. According to Hume's own later account, the *Treatise* "fell deadborn from the press, without reaching such distinction as even to excite a murmur among the zealots."

But the zealots' neglect was answered by the attentions of posterity. *A Treatise of Human Nature* is now regarded by many as the greatest work of English-language philosophy ever written. Since January 2003, Baker & Taylor (B&T) alone has sold 1,246 units of Hume's *Treatise*, under 23 different ISBNs. Behold the "long tail."

We know most books have a markedly shorter tail, and books on current affairs are frequently among the shortest-tailed of all creatures in the publishing menagerie. The time-bound nature of current affairs titles is a challenge for publishers—not only can such titles decline in relevance soon after they are published, but changes in public attitudes and preoccupations can jeopardize a book's appeal even in the time from proposal to publication. The production cycle for the book may fail to keep up with the fast pace of events in the modern world.

Consider a case study: Matthew Yglesias is a very popular, Harvard-educated, liberal blogger with a witty and engaging style. His eponymous blog is read by thousands of people every day. As an accomplished writer with an established online following, Yglesias would appear on paper to be a good candidate for a successful first book, and his new title, *Heads in the Sand*, was published by John Wiley in April of this year. Yet sales have been disappointing so far. To date, B&T has sold only 163 units of the book, and returned 631 units to the publisher.

There are always a number of factors involved when a book fails to meet expectations, but one factor in this case may be changes in the market. Let's look at what Publisher Alley® (Pub Alley) shows us about sales trends for Politics/International Relations titles in six month blocks, going back to the spring of 2006. The sample for each time period includes all cloth titles in the international relations subject area with a list price under \$30. For each six-month publication period, we reported sales extending out forty-five days beyond the last pub date. So, for example, the sales numbers for titles published in spring 2006—which runs from January 1 to June 30 of that year—are from the period beginning on January 1 and ending on August 15:



**From 2006 to 2008,
sales of international
relations titles
dropped 56%.**

| | # Titles Published | # of Units Sold | Value of Units at List | Avg. Units per Title | Avg. \$ Value per Title |
|-------------|--------------------|-----------------|------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Spring 2006 | 57 | 93,776 | \$2,456,685 | 1645 | \$43,100 |
| Fall 2006 | 56 | 91,208 | \$2,363,484 | 1630 | \$42,205 |
| Spring 2007 | 60 | 73,353 | \$1,935,337 | 1223 | \$32,256 |
| Fall 2007 | 53 | 46,960 | \$1,221,302 | 886 | \$23,043 |
| Spring 2008 | 71 | 51,469 | \$1,334,623 | 724 | \$18,798 |

Yglesias conceived and started his book back in 2006, when foreign policy questions were burning up the pages of newspapers, and were a hot topic in the fall election. The book was finished in late 2007 or early 2008, and finally published in April of this year. By that time, as we can see, sales of international relations titles were down about 56% from spring 2006.

Seizing the Moment: Chelsea Green and the Democratic National Convention

Yglesias weighed in recently in on the controversy that has sprung up concerning Chelsea Green's forthcoming title, *Obama's Challenge*, written by Robert Kuttner, the cofounder and senior editor of *The American Prospect*. Yglesias notes a difference between *Obama's Challenge* and some other political books:

Also interesting is this — unlike a normal political book that's finished, it's not going to float around in the ether for months waiting for me to try to scheme my way into possession of a free copy.

What Yglesias is referring to is that Chelsea Green took two unusual steps with *Obama's Challenge*. While the book is scheduled for its 75,000-copy offset release on September 15, Chelsea Green made 2,000 advance copies available for distribution at the Democratic National Convention in Denver. In addition, coupons for an early discount were placed in the welcome packets for 15,000 convention-goers. The coupons are redeemable on Amazon.com, and the book will be printed on demand by BookSurge as a \$14.95 trade paperback. *Obama's Challenge* became available from Amazon on the first day of the convention, August 25, three weeks prior to its availability in bookstores.

As of this writing on August 25, the sales rank for *Obama's Challenge* is #1,749. According to Yglesias, perhaps smarting from the frustrating experience with his own book,

That's totally awesome. The publishing industry is badly in need of a shakeup in its methods and business models, and this sounds like a step in the right direction. My order's been placed.

Not everyone, of course, thinks the decision by Chelsea Green to release the book early on Amazon is so totally awesome. The announcement generated an immediate outcry from some independent retailers. And Barnes & Noble

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We are headed into the most important election season in a generation that will, I believe, impact how we deal with the multiple cascading crises America confronts: the war in Iraq, the dangers of new military confrontations with Iran and Russia, escalating climate change that threatens life on earth, an economic situation as dire as the Great Depression, and a deepening energy crisis that threatens to fundamentally change our way of life.

**—MARGO BALDWIN,
CHELSEA GREEN**

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promptly cancelled their order for the book, saying they would make the book available online, but would not carry it in their stores. In response to the outcry, Chelsea Green's publisher, Margo Baldwin, published an open letter to the book-selling community on the *Publisher's Weekly* website on August 18. She said,

We are headed into the most important election season in a generation that will, I believe, impact how we deal with the multiple cascading crises America confronts: the war in Iraq, the dangers of new military confrontations with Iran and Russia, escalating climate change that threatens life on earth, an economic situation as dire as the Great Depression, and a deepening energy crisis that threatens to fundamentally change our way of life.

Chelsea Green and the author, Robert Kuttner, are taking an enormous risk in publishing this book. We have two months to get it into readers' hands before the election. If Obama wins, the book will have even more life, but if he doesn't the book will be done. This is about a publisher's commitment to its author to get one of a very few pro-Obama books out into the marketplace in the shortest amount of time. We are printing 75,000 copies, the largest first printing in our history, which shows how important we think this book is. But it pales in comparison to anti-Obama books flooding the market. I wonder how many booksellers are happy to sell another few thousand "abomination" books while being "outraged" by Chelsea Green's decision to make its book available as fast as possible.

Publishers of current affairs titles are often motivated not just by a desire to sell books, but to have an impact on the world. And Chelsea Green's motivation in its decisions regarding *Obama's Challenge* appears to be mainly political, not economic. Chelsea Green is a socially and politically engaged publishing house attempting to have an influence on the Democratic convention and November election. Baldwin also told *Alley Talk* in an interview that the publishing and bookselling community are working in the twenty-first century "with a nineteenth-century model."

The Economics of a Timely Release

In her open letter, Baldwin emphasized that the publisher and author "are taking an enormous risk in publishing this book." The publisher's financial risk is largely tied to the 75,000-copy run, which was awarded to the Toronto printer Webcom. If *Obama's Challenge* ultimately succeeds financially for Chelsea Green, as well as politically, that success will have to come from the offset printing, not from POD sales through BookSurge/Amazon. According to Chelsea Green sales rep Michael Weaver,

Chelsea Green is making no profit on the POD version of this book—none. And in fact we're losing money on all the redeemed coupons. The POD book is a marketing expense that will be lucky to pay for itself. The goal of our little gambit is absolutely not to sell 100,000 copies of the POD; the goal is to sell just enough to prime the pump for when the "real" book comes out.



Of course, the publicity generated by the industry controversy over *Obama's Challenge* is probably helping to prime the pump as well. It will likely boost sales of the offset product when it arrives around September 15 at brick-and-mortar stores.

One contributor to the *Publisher's Weekly* online discussion said, "From this outsider's perspective, it looks like the company failed to get their act together to publish the book in time for the convention—a deadline they should have been able to make. Forget POD; they could have seen this coming." But Baldwin countered in the interview with *Alley Talk* that the extended Democratic primary campaign season and nomination battle played a major role in the publication schedule. Kuttner was not interested in writing a similar book dealing with any other potential Democratic candidate, but only wanted to write about Obama specifically. Since Obama didn't clinch the nomination until early June, that left Chelsea Green and Kuttner with a very short timeframe in which to turn the book around before the fall campaign. Baldwin observes that "the book went from final manuscript to bound books in 4 weeks, which is what is so remarkable."

Baldwin also recalled Chelsea Green's experiences with George Lakoff's *Don't Think of an Elephant!* during the 2004 election season. That title took off dramatically, driven mainly by word of mouth and blog publicity. The title had received no major media reviews other than in *The Atlantic*, which "trashed it," according to Baldwin. Chelsea Green was caught short, running out of stock. Then, as now, they were seeking to have an impact on the ongoing race, so running out of books was a blow to more than the bottom line.

Short Tails versus Long Tails

It is not surprising that current affairs titles would have a shorter tail than titles in other subject areas, but there is evidence that bears out this impression. First let's look at a collection of some of the top current affairs titles published in the period from July 1, 2006, through June 30, 2007. We compared the sales from the initial period running from July 1, 2006 through August 15, 2007, against more recent sales on the same titles since May 1, 2008. The percentages of sales in the recent sales period, as a fraction of sales in the initial sales period, are shown in the last column:

| Title | Publisher | Unit Sales 6/1/06 -8/31/08 | Value at List 6/1/06- 8/31/08 | Unit Sales Since 5/1/08 | Value at List Since 5/1/08 | % of Initial Now Selling in Long Tail |
|---|-----------------------|----------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| State of Emergency: The Third World Invasion and Conquest of America (Buchanan) | Thomas Dunne Books | 20,854 | \$520,343 | -30 | -\$419 | -0.1% |

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| Title | Publisher | Unit Sales 6/1/06 -8/31/08 | Value at List 6/1/06- 8/31/08 | Unit Sales Since 5/1/08 | Value at List Since 5/1/08 | % of Initial Now Selling in Long Tail |
|---|-------------------------|----------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina (Rich) | Penguin USA | 13,833 | \$359,067 | 78 | \$1,325 | 0.6% |
| At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA (Tenet) | Harpercollins | 11,006 | \$330,407 | 135 | \$2,958 | 1.2% |
| America Alone: The End of the World As We Know It (Steyn) | Regnery Publishing | 10,992 | \$307,231 | 1541 | \$27,973 | 14.0% |
| Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War (Isikoff) | Crown | 7,333 | \$190,326 | 52 | \$937 | 0.7% |
| Enough: The Phony Leaders, Dead-end Movements, And Culture of Failure That Are Undermining Black America ... (Williams) | Crown | 7,222 | \$180,594 | 66 | \$1,098 | 0.9% |
| Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone (Chandrasekaran) | Alfred A. Knopf | 7,040 | \$182,758 | 122 | \$2,380 | 1.7% |
| American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America (Hedges) | Free Press | 5,929 | \$148,263 | 66 | \$1,128 | 1.1% |
| Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic (Johnson) | Metropolitan/Henry Holt | 5,738 | \$149,131 | 121 | \$2,202 | 2.1% |

The average percentage in the last column for all nine titles is 2.4%. Compare this to sales for the same periods of time of Health and Fitness titles published in the same 2006/07 period. (We left off some of the top sellers in this area, because they were such high-volume titles that the comparison with the rest is not apples to apples.)

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| Title | Publisher | Unit Sales 6/1/06 -8/31/08 | Value at List 6/1/06- 8/31/08 | Unit Sales Since 5/1/08 | Value at List Since 5/1/08 | % of Initial Now Selling in Long Tail |
|---|---------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| The Fiber 35 Diet: Nature's Weight Loss Secret (Watson) | Free Press | 8,841 | \$229,940 | 43 | \$978 | 0.5% |
| The Female Brain (Brizendine) | Broadway Books | 8,687 | \$216,832 | 647 | \$10,187 | 7.4% |
| The South Beach Heart Program: The 4-step Plan ... (Agatston) | Rodale | 8,248 | \$214,036 | 7469 | \$165,379 | 90.6% |
| Chasing Life: New Discoveries in the Search for Immortality ... (Gupta) | Wellness Central | 7,653 | \$191,273 | 43 | \$634 | 0.6% |
| French Women for All Seasons: ... (Guiliano) | Alfred A. Knopf | 7,604 | \$189,770 | 433 | \$5,986 | 5.7% |
| Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think (Wansink) | Bantam Books | 7,174 | \$179,376 | 420 | \$6,476 | 5.9% |
| The 5 Factor Diet (Pasternak) | Meredith | 6,429 | \$160,429 | 449 | \$9,193 | 7.0% |
| The Seven Pillars of Health (Colbert) | Siloam Pr | 5,857 | \$117,081 | 327 | \$6,301 | 5.6% |
| The Cure: Heal Your Body, Save Your Life (Brantley) | John Wiley | 5,844 | \$145,860 | 189 | \$4,716 | 3.2% |
| Prevention's the Sugar Solution: Your Symptoms Are Real ... (Prevention Magazine) | Rodale | 5,283 | \$131,988 | 180 | \$4,215 | 3.4% |





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| Title | Publisher | Unit Sales 6/1/06 -8/31/08 | Value at List 6/1/06- 8/31/08 | Unit Sales Since 5/1/08 | Value at List Since 5/1/08 | % of Initial Now Selling in Long Tail |
|---|-------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Best Choices from the People's Pharmacy (Graedon) | Rodale | 5,234 | \$156,788 | 1544 | \$18,286 | 29.5% |
| The 5 Minute Face: The Quick & Easy Makeup Guide ... (Carmindy) | Regan Books | 4,506 | \$89,895 | 96 | \$2,107 | 2.1% |
| The Beck Diet Solution: Train Your Brain to Think Like a Thin Person (Beck) | Oxmoor House | 4,358 | \$108,732 | 609 | \$13,227 | 14.0% |
| Mariel Hemingway's Healthy Living ... (Hemingway) | Harpersan-francisco | 3,966 | \$106,913 | 190 | \$3,519 | 4.8% |
| Dr. Neal Barnard's Program on Reversing Diabetes ... (Barnard) | Rodale | 3,927 | \$101,906 | 276 | \$4,771 | 7.0% |
| Rethinking Thin: The New Science of Weight Loss ... (Kolata) | Farrar, Straus & Giroux | 3,573 | \$85,760 | 59 | \$1,416 | 1.7% |
| Dr. Gott's No Flour, No Sugar Diet (Gott) | Wellness Central | 3,340 | \$73,447 | 909 | \$17,915 | 27.2% |
| What's Your Poo Telling You? (Richman) | Chronicle Books | 1,619 | \$16,112 | 2146 | \$21,361 | 132.6% |

It turns out that the average in the last column for all twenty titles on this list 15.7%. That is, on average, sales for titles in the Health and Fitness category published from July 1, 2006, through June 30, 2007, for the sales period since May 1, 2008, represent 15.7% of same-title sales in the period from July 1, 2006



through August 15, 2006. Health and Fitness titles would appear to have dramatically longer tails than current affairs titles.

Publishing in current affairs is challenging, especially for publishers aiming for a timely impact on the political world. But with any luck, a good current affairs title will not fall deadborn into the contemporary scene. And if the timing is just right, it might even extract some murmurs from the zealots—perhaps even some excited shouts.

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