Academic Publishing: New Opportunities for the Culture of Supply and the Nature of Demand

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The scholarly monograph has been compared to the Hapsburg monarchy in that it seems to have been in decline forever! [1]

It was 2002 when Stephen Greenblatt, in his role as President of the US Modern Language Association, urged his membership to recognize what he called a "crisis in scholarly publication." It is easy to forget now that this crisis, as he then saw it, had nothing to do with the rise of digital technologies, e-publishing or open access. Indeed, it puts his words into an instructive context to recall that it was only later in that same years that the Firefox browser saw its initial release, and the total number of websites available in the world then was around 3 million, as opposed to the half a billion out there today. [2]

What Greenblatt was actually concerned about was one of shrinking capacity for monograph production by traditional presses, combined with an increasing requirement for such monographs by tenure and promotion committees as marks of scholarly achievement.[3] Fast forward a dozen years, and while these emergent problems have not gone away, a whole raft of further complications – for scholars, for publishers and for libraries – have emerged.

But given the history of the debate, the current focus on the 'digital transition' is of less interest than the nearly exclusive focus on the supply side of the story. The question that seems unanswered is that of the demand side of the equation, that is, of changes in the readership habits of scholars as consumers of published research. It is the scholars actively engaged in the creation of knowledge, not merely its evaluation, who are implicated in this cohort, those who are seeking and digesting the work of their peers as a mode for enhancing their own understanding and their own research production. This activity does not necessarily align, however, with that of the other main consumer of scholarly publications, that is evaluation and assessment panels – one of the primary sources of the 'original' publication crisis, and an ongoing issue which requires substantial further investigation, as it cuts to the heart of the academic rewards system and the possible perverse incentives it may be maintaining.

Above and beyond what it can do, there is clearly an emotional attachment to the monograph, to the physicality of the book cum object which represents one's intellectual achievement. While we may yearn with Horace for the 'monument to outlast bronze', it is in the bronze itself, that is, the physical object, that we seek evidence of that fame. There remains a prestige in print, in the perceived

[1] http://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jep/3336451.0011.201?rgn=main;view=fulltext
[2] http://venturebeat.com/2012/08/14/the-internet-2002-2012-infographic/
[3] http://www.mla.org/scholarly_pub

exclusivity and in the visible, tangible resource intensity of it, which the age of e-publishing has yet to effectively supplant.

But the book is more than an object, it also represents a mode of communication – a format suited to a complex, contextualized, densely evidenced argument. While it is clear that we still respect deeply and require inherently this mode of communication, it is no longer clear that this is our primary mode for consuming scholarship. Authors may bristle at the fact that their publishers are actually willing to sell access to only the introduction and first chapter of their well-crafted monographs, but those same authors are also very likely, as researchers, to consume the work of their peers in exactly the same manner: piecemeal, in a manner and intensity that suits their own knowledge creation framework, rather than that of the author of the work.

There is very little evidence to support or refute this claim. Although it is more focussed on researcher perceptions of mode of production (of their own work) than of consumptions (of the work of others) a 2012 JISC study showed that when researchers do print electronic resources, they are more likely to do so in part than as a whole. [4]But even here we lack any evidence of what is then done with the work that has been printed off. Clearly the demand side issues of the scholarly publication equation are an aspect of the ongoing 'crisis' which has been neglected.

Some research does exist on the general behaviours exhibited by users of virtual libraries.[5] Two particular trends can be viewed as possible digital extensions of earlier analogue reactions to heightened access to published information. The first of these is known as **horizontal information seeking**, which refers to the habit of looking at only a small percentage of a site's content, then navigating away from the it (often not to return again). This behavior seems to be the norm, not the exception, as around 60 per cent of e-journal users were found to view no more than three pages in the journal and a majority then never returned to that sourceafterward. The second relevantinformation gathering trend is known as **squirreling behavior**, referring to the habit of amassing a significant amount of downloaded material and saving it for later digestion (or not). Although these behaviours may be dismissedas the habits of the "Google generation" bleeding through, the same study also found that "from undergraduates to professors, people exhibit a strong tendency towards shallow, horizontal, `flicking' behaviour in digital libraries. Power browsing and viewing appear to be the norm for all. The popularity of abstracts among older researchers rather gives the game away."

In some ways, this move from wholesale consumption to selective browsing seems a natural reaction to the information age. Greg Crane has surmised that

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[4]http://www.jisc.ac.uk/blog/exploring-open-access-to-save-monographs-the-question-is-how-24-oct-2012

[5]informationbehaviour of the researcher of the future, 11 January 2008, http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/reppres/gg_final_keynote_11012008.pdf

we have the capacity to read only around 40,000 books in our lifetime.[6] There would have been a time when only privileged access to a great library in an urban capital could have brought a scholar in contact with this many volumes.In this context, a work of breadth as well as would have rendered a great potential service to a reader who might not share such access. But the all-encompassing, complete nature that a humanists' knowledge is expected somehow to represent has become enshrined in our modes not just of publishing, but of conceiving of our disciplines. The humanities, as opposed to the sciences, enjoy not only the richness of a long history of source material, but also of a culture which seeks to recreate the young scholar in the image of their mentor, rather than encouraging collaborative ventures (eg in the form of co-publication) as a method of sustaining and extending disciplinary knowledge.[7]A work of humanistic scholarship is still expected not only to report a research finding, but also to contextualize that finding, in essence, to curate a body of knowledge. But information curation has been disintermediated in the information age, hence the widening gap between our information behaviours as horizontal browsers and our attachment to the traditional forms of scholarly communication.

But whether or not these modes of scholarly production and communication are outdated is one question – whether or not they are harmful is quite another. Certainly the dependence on monograph publication as a marker for scholarly quality is harmful in the way that Greenblatt highlighted more than a decade ago. And, in a controversial policy statement, the American Historical Association advocated placing a six year embargo on PhD theses on the basis that this would increase their publishibility given that "History has been and remains a book-based discipline." [8]

But maintaining the model of the lone scholar and the long monograph as our touchstones for scholarly production raises significant barriers to meeting some of the emergent expectations for scholarship: the need to engage wider audiences, the need to create clear and auditable trails of scholarship through analogue and digital resources, to meet the moral and financial demands of the emergent open access publishing system, to be able to recognize quality scholarship as knowledge creation and communication in itself, rather than via its proxies such as a book published by a certain publisher. These are not just external pressures placed upon historians, but indeed the will and desire of the historical research community itself, and the outcry criticizing the AHA's proposal of a digital thesis embargo was equally as passionate as the original pronouncement. It is not the digital transformation that is changing scholarship, but the needs and wants of scholars themselves.

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[6]http://www.dlib.org/dlib/march06/crane/03crane.html

[7]**Collaboration in the sciences and the humanities: A comparative phenomenology**Arts and Humanities in Higher EducationJuly 2012 11: 250-261,

[8]http://blog.historians.org/2013/07/american-historical-association-statement-on-policies-regarding-the-embargoing-of-completed-history-phd-dissertations/

The whole idea of scholarship is oriented towards maximising the dissemination of research results. Carrying out a research activity is all about exploring territories, where knowing what the others are doing, what their most recent advances are, what projects are being undertaken, is essential to make sure that one's own research actually goes beyond the state of the art and can be situated within a larger corpus of discoveries. Communicating results is thus an essential activity in one's academic life, on not only because the assessment of such communications through peer review mechanisms impact on the capacity to get institutional recognition and thus financial means to carry out further research.

So what are the barriers to widespread uptake of new publishing models that can speed the process of scholarship and the sharing of knowledge? There are two primary ones that will need to be addressed: **protection** and **authority**. Historians are very protective of their data and their sources until such time as they have published their work – and rightly so, given the reward structure's linking of original research with reputation, publication and, by direct extension, with tenure and promotion. But while the more rapid communications cycle in many of the science disciplines may be driven by technological change, it is also underpinned by the system of patenting and protection of ideas, products and processes. It should be equally possible for a historian to discover links between sources, or uncover unknown sources, and to simultaneously protect and share this discovery. This research output need only be able to be seen as distinct from the article or book that might later explore it, and provide a traceable link to the progenitor of the idea, something that could be included as a reference by other scholars seeking to build upon this work. If these protections are in place, there is no reason that a work of any length cannot be considered as an independent 'act of scholarship.' While other scholars may then take that link up and work with it before the originating scholar's work is done, well, that is precisely the point, to have many minds working in the same direction from different perspectives, each able to share, but also to document, their contributions.

At certain stages of the research process, it is often not so much important to produce an in-depth scholarly summation than to provide short snapshots on the current developments of an experiment in hard sciences, or the analysis of a source in the humanities. This is a situation where it is more appropriate for a scholar to write small reports in the form of blog entries and publicize them on various social networks. Blogs offer a first layer of scholarly publication with both online availability and the possibility to comment on the actual scholarly content. It is also a simple way to gain a primacy for a specific result or gather observations step-by-step, for instance during an archaeological campaign. The ideal situation is when blogging occurs within a secured scholarly environment such as Hypotheses.org where researchers benefit from an editorial support as well as a wide visibility.

But even if a scholar were able to create and disseminate a trail of micropublications, many of which might be cited by peers as interesting and useful knowledge, how could this coinage then be exchanged for those most valuable assets of reputation, recognition and professional advancement? It is here that the second main issue with new forms of publication, **authority**, arises.

Peer review has been and will remain the gold standard for academic quality for the forseeable future. In fact:

> Conventional peer review is so central to scholars' perception of quality that its retention is essentially a *sine qua non* for any method of archival publication, new or old, to be effective and valued. Peer review is *the* hallmark of quality that results from external and independent valuation. It also functions as an effective means of winnowing the papers that a researcher needs to examine in the course of his or her research. (Harley et al)[9]

Some of this will occur by proxy: citations may not carry the same weight in humanities disciplines that they do in the sciences, but certainly a protected idea referenced widely will have proven its impact, if not its quality. But plenty of electronic platforms have demonstrated us viable and reliable practices for managing quality assessments that are overt as well as covert. User registration information can indicate academic status, as can community self-regulation. The binary simplicity of Facebook 'friending' and 'liking' may not be fit to this purpose, but if a young scholar is able to document positive responses from known senior scholars in their field over a period of months or years, then surely this is in fact a better peer review format, gated by interest and active understanding, not only via a formal loop instigated and controlled by a publisher, who has already made an initial assessment and may have rejected much good work not on the basis of its quality but because of externalities related to the focus of the press or the nature of the publication: its length, its language, its format.

Even within traditional length formats of scholarly communication, if we are still attached to the traditional journal editorial setting, we can observe that its core services, namely identification, certification, dissemination and long-term availability, can be easily implemented on the basis of an existing publication repository. Indeed, such a repository can provide a submission environment, which identifies authors and time-stamp the document, and offers a perfect online dissemination platform, with the necessary long-term archiving facility of the hosting institution. In such a context, designing a certification environment mechanism whereby a paper deposited by an author is forwarded to an editorial committee for peer-review, is quite a straightforward endeavour. This is exactly what is now being experimented with the Episciences[6]project on top of the HAL platform. Such a platform is also interesting in that it offers new possibilities for changing our perspective on the certification process: open submission, open peer-review[7], updated versions of an article and community feedback are features that may dramatically change our views on scholarly publishing.

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[9]Harley, Diane, et al. Sarah Earl-Novell, Jennifer Arter, Shannon Lawrence, and C. Judson King. 2007. "The Influence of Academic Values on Scholarly Publication and Communication Practices." *Journal of Electronic Publishing* 10, no. 2 (Spring),http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3336451.0010.204

The CIBER study cited above also asked the question of what the information environment might be like in 2017. It concurs with the suspicion that research processes and publications will change drastically to take advantage of the opportunities and respond to the current inequities in the scholarly publishing environment. But it is not the technology at hand that needs to change between now and then to enable such a system of alternatives to conventional publishing to emerge, become normed and be accepted as works of scholarship. It is the culture of the institutions and the disciplines that need to stretch to accommodate these possibilities. Research infrastructural developments like CENDARI (www.cendari.eu) are ready to create such safe places for scholarship to extend its reach.

The various possibilities outlined so far only make sense if research institutions invest time, political energy and budget to implement such models and make them part of the daily life of their researchers. A typical best practice example can be taken from the recently published open access policy of Inria[8] which combines a deposit mandate of all publications on the HAL archive, a cautious assessment of any new models provided by the private publishing sector and the funding of the Episciences platform.

We can observe that having a not too overly conservative vision on scholarly communication opens up a whole range of possibilities to improve the way scientific ideas can be seamlessly transmitted to a wide audience. Even more, we can see that a new landscape can be outlined where the management of virtual research environments comprising research data, various types of notes and commentaries, as well as drafted documents linking these objects together could dramatically change the way scholarship will be carried out in the future. In such environments, various levels of "peer-review" are possible, from the simple feedback of known colleagues to the possibility for any member of a research community to comment on the content. Traditional peer-review is just one possible implementation of such a model where the main objective should remain to improve quality and wide accessibility for science, and to rebalance the values we communicate in the way we use scholarship, with those expressed by our dissemination and communication infrastructures.