ON THE PROFESSION

Publishing in Latin American Studies Today

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Scholarly publishers have become used to thinking of our business as continually in crisis. Going back to at least the early 1970s, when a series of influential articles defining the nature of the crisis appeared in *Scholarly Publishing*, we are now well into our fourth decade of crisis management.[1] I have made some contributions to this literature, notably for LASA an essay in the Winter 1993 issue of the *Forum* titled "Latin American Studies and the Crisis in Scholarly Communication."[2] What has changed and what has stayed the same since then?

The bad news is that many of the disturbing trends I highlighted in that article still continue today. These include (1) growth in the number, size, and cost of journals; (2) cancellation of subscriptions by university libraries, especially for journals in print form; (3) despite these cancellations, a steady decline in the proportion of library budgets available to purchase monographs compared with journals and electronic databases; (4) less administrative support for journal editorial offices; (5) no increase in subsidies for university presses; and (6) more demand than ever for publication of journal articles and monographs by faculty seeking tenure and promotion. For university presses publishing monographs, the future looked bleak. As I detailed in that article, the average sale of a typical monograph had dropped from around 1,500 in the early 1970s to fewer than 1,000 by the early 1980s all the way down to 500 by the early 1990s. Faced with such a steep decline in this stream of revenue, many presses had resorted to publishing more "mid-list" trade books (which big commercial publishers had been abandoning in favor of blockbuster titles), reference works, regional titles, paperbacks for course adoption, and even fiction and poetry, leaving fewer slots on their lists open to monographs.[3] As possible solutions to this crisis, I had analyzed the pros and cons of (1) faculty in Latin American studies publishing more of their books abroad, (2) LASA itself assuming responsibility for publishing some monographs (as, say, the American Sociological Association does with its Rose Monograph Series), and (3) experimentation with electronic publishing (premised on its acceptability to tenure committees).

The good news is that not all has stayed the same, and some significant changes have occurred. But the impact of these changes has been mixed. Consider the advantages offered by the availability of dissertations in electronic form, both through the commercial databases of ProQuest and through the interuniversity cooperative effort known as the Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD), which began in the mid-1990s and has grown substantially since then. While making scholarly literature of this type far more readily accessible than ever before, such databases have had the concomitant disadvantages of putting even more pressure on junior faculty trying to publish their first book in order to gain tenure. Libraries, quite rationally, figure that since their collections now include access to virtually all dissertations produced in the United States, they should not spend their scarce book budgets on monographs that have derived from dissertations. Presses, also quite rationally, know that libraries are purchasing fewer such monographs and thus can anticipate lower sales on these books than others; hence editors are wary of inviting submission of revised dissertations. Yet tenure committees continue to treat the monograph as the gold standard for publication in many fields of the humanities and social sciences. Overall, then, the system as a whole has become dysfunctional.[4]

With monographs less reliable as a source of income, presses have invested more in other types of books, as noted above, only to have their missions questioned by their parent universities as they now seem to have drifted away from their core mandate to publish scholarly monographs.[5] Consequently, those universities with presses seem little inclined to increase their subsidies, and those without have little motivation to launch new presses.[6] With the squeeze on students' finances from escalating tuition and other fees, teachers have taken advantage of the new technologies that provide them with course-management systems like Blackboard and Sakai and e-reserve systems through libraries to put many articles and book chapters online that were earlier included in print course packs. (Edited collections are particularly susceptible to being cherry-picked in this manner, as acquiring editors are well aware, making them more reluctant to take them on.) Unfortunately, either by intention or through ignorance, much of this online copying produces no revenue at all for presses, which experience a further erosion of sales of paperback editions for adoption at the same time as they are experiencing an erosion of sales of the cloth editions because more libraries than ever are now purchasing paperbacks whenever they are published simultaneously with hardbacks.[7] This change in purchasing patterns has compelled many presses to return to the earlier scheme of publishing books first in hardback and then only later, after a delay of a year or so, issuing them in paperback—unless subsidies can be provided to make publication of a paperback possible right away by making up for the income lost from decreased hardback sales (which are often below 100 copies for a dual edition).

The rise of chain superstores like Barnes and Noble and of online retailers like Amazon.com in the past decade has been a mixed blessing. While providing vastly more shelf space to display titles, chain stores stock only titles carrying trade discounts, and they follow inventory rules that oblige them to return copies that have not sold in ninety days; so, even if more scholarly titles of broad interest are making it into these stores, they often do not get reviewed early enough for people to know they are there to buy, resulting in large returns for those presses that engage in trade publishing. Amazon makes millions of titles available and is incomparable as a bibliographic resource, with such added features as "Search Inside the Book;" but at the same time it helps presses sell new books, it undercuts those sales by offering used copies on the same page, and for a while it was even selling dissertations under an arrangement with ProQuest, thus exacerbating the publication of revised dissertations.

So, is there any unambiguously good news to report? Happily, there is, and it takes the form of what Cambridge sociologist (and Polity Press co-owner) John Thompson has dubbed the "hidden revolution" in scholarly publishing.[8] This is, simply, the rise to prominence of the same technology that produced the Xerox machine, which as the Docutech became the prototype of a digital printing machine that has since taken the industry by storm. Its breakout event came with the founding of Lightning Print, now Lightning Source, in the late 1990s as a subsidiary of the Ingram Company, the largest wholesale book distributor in the country. By providing the ability to store books in a digital repository and print them out one copy at a time to fill order from the bookstores it services, Lightning Source offered as "print on demand" (POD) a solution to the industry's #1 problem: excess inventory, which ties up capital for long periods of time and has to be written off and pulped at the end. Henceforth demand and supply could be kept in close equilibrium, freeing up capital for other uses, including experimentation with electronic publishing. A further evolution of business models built around this technology led to "short-run digital printing" (SRDP), which allowed for an intermediate stage of a book's life cycle, starting with traditional offset printing of a modest number of hardbacks (400-500), then SRDP printings ranging from 100 to 300 copies for the paperback edition, and finally pure POD for the "long tail" of the book's final stage (where the search capabilities of Google provide the opportunity to sell a book indefinitely into the future, even if just one copy at a time, ending the need ever to declare a book out of print).[9] It cannot be emphasized enough that this single technological breakthrough has been the salvation of scholarly publishing and can help keep it afloat for many years to come—until, if ever, demand for print copies ceases and customers become satisfied with reading everything in electronic form in future iterations of Amazon's Kindle, the Sony Reader, or any number of varieties of mobile phone devices.

Will that future ever come? It is difficult to say. Predictions about electronic publishing are notoriously unreliable, as those large commercial companies that invested and lost millions at the beginning of the new millennium can attest. But ask a publisher about XML, and you will find that, for those who have not already done so, most of them have begun to think seriously about incorporating XML markup into the production process, so as to be ready for the time when both book and journal content can be "multi-purposed" for use on all these different types of electronic reading devices. In the scholarly arena, it is quite clear that journals have been making the transition from print to electronic quite successfully, with Project Muse proving to have been the Mellon Foundation's greatest success so far in encouraging the move into the digital era in scholarship. And now, with "open access" already gaining great strength as an alternative to subscription-based publishing in journals, especially in the sciences, the future looks bright. But books present much greater challenges in making the transition. The Mellon Foundation's latest annual report admits that neither the Gutenberg-e nor the ACLS History (now Humanities) E-Book projects lived up to early expectations and they seem unsustainable, at least as originally envisioned, over the long term.[10] This has to do not only with issues of technical complexity and the need for expert staff support and extensive training of faculty involved, but also with legal barriers of permissions needed especially for works incorporating multimedia and difficulties for long-term archival preservation. Also, few advocates of "open access" have yet been willing to talk about how it can be applied to books, and as time goes on, there is a danger of creating another "digital divide" between book and journal content, the latter increasingly available online, the former not.[11] Meanwhile, no one has yet mounted an effort as ambitious as the one I outlined in my 1993 *Forum* article, though there are several smaller-scale efforts under way, including a monograph series in Romance Studies being carried out at my own press as an "open access" experiment in our joint venture with the library that we call the Office of Digital Scholarly Publishing.[12] It is through such experiments that we will eventually find out what fate awaits the monograph in our brave new digital world.[13]

Endnotes

1 William B. Harvey, Herbert S. Bailey, Jr., William C. Becker, and John B. Putnam, "The Impending Crisis in University Publishing," *Scholarly Publishing* 3 (April 1972): 195-207. William C. Becker, "The Crisis—One Year Later," *Scholarly Publishing* 4 (July 1973): 291-302. William C. Becker, "The Crisis—Is

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It Over?" *Scholarly Publishing* 5 (April 1974): 195-210.

[2] Other contributions of mine include: "The Crisis in Scholarly Communication," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 3, 1995, B1-B2; "The Future of Scholarly Publishing in Comparative Politics," *APSA Organized Section on Comparative Politics Newsletter*, Summer 2000, 6-10; "The Future of Scholarly Book Publishing in Political Theory," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 40 (January): 129-132; "Scholarly Book Publishing in Political Science: A Hazardous Business," in Stephen Yoder, ed., *Publishing Political Science* (Washington, D.C.: American Political Science Association, 2008), Ch. 3, pp. 35-51.

[3] I traced this displacement effect in relation to "mid-list" trade books in "Scholarly Monographs May Be the Ultimate Victims of the Upheavals in Trade Publishing," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 10, 1990, B2-B3.

[4] I explain this dysfunctionality in more detail in "Dissertations into Books? The Lack of Logic in the System," *Against the Grain* 19/2 (April 2007): 75-77. A recent effort to move away from placing so much emphasis on the monograph as the "gold standard" of publication is the Modern Language Association's "Report on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure" (released December 7, 2006).

[5] This mission drift was a major theme of the so-called Ithaka Report, "University Publishing in a Digital Age" (released July 23, 2007).

[6] The Ithaka Report (p. 19) describes well the kind of Catch-22 in which university presses find themselves at present. "They feel they are held to a different standard than all the cost centers on campus, that they are essentially penalized for pursuing a cost recovery model, which then becomes the basis for evaluating their performance. When they perform well (in financial terms), they are 'rewarded' by having their subsidies cut. When they run too large a deficit, they are threatened with closure. Some have responded to these expectations by elevating cost-recovery in their selection criteria, publishing more trade books and shying away from the least marketable fields. This approach may improve their financial situation, while at the same time undermining the case for subsidies."

[7] The erosion of revenue from copying done through course-management and e-reserve systems has, in the extreme, driven some publishers to bring suit for copyright infringement. In April 2008 the presses of Cambridge and Oxford, joined by Sage Publications, filed suit against Georgia State University for illegal copying of books and journals they publish.

[8] See John Thompson, *Books in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), esp. Part IV, "The Digital Revolution."

[9] The theory of "the long tail" was first popularized by Chris Anderson in an article in *Wired* in October 2004 and elaborated by him later in *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling More of Less* (New York: Hyperion, 2006).

[10] See Donald J. Walters and Joseph S. Meisel, "Scholarly Publishing Initiatives," in the *2007 Annual Report of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation*, pp. 31-45.

[11] I address the problem of open access for books in "The Challenge of Open Access for niversity Presses," *Learned Publishing* 20/3 (July 2007): 65-72. An abbreviated version of this article was formally adopted by the Association of American University Presses as its *Statement on Open Access* in February 2007: http://aaupnet.org/aboutup/issues/oa/index.html.

[12] For current projects of the Office of Digital Scholarly Publishing at Penn State, including the Romance Studies series, see http://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/odsp/current_projects.html.

[13] In my 1993 *Forum* article, I quoted Nancy Eaton, then director of Iowa State's library, as putting her finger on the heart of the problem in scholarly publishing: "I would submit that economic forces will shape the future library more than either user needs or evolving information technology. The driving force which will mandate change in libraries is the economic reality that higher education and society in general can no longer economically support scholarly communication and scholarly publishing in their present configurations. We all must balance our personal checkbooks each month or face the creditors. I submit that we can no longer balance our library checkbooks and that scholarly publishing will be forced to reconfigure itself, albeit over a significant period of time." Nancy Eaton is now Dean of Libraries and Scholarly Communication at Penn State. It was her vision that led to the creation of the Office of Digital Scholarly Publishing in the spring of 2005 and the administration merger of the press and the library later that year. The Ithaka Report devotes a paragraph to the Office's projects as a model of one way that scholarly publishing can be reconfigured. This essay is dedicated to her. ■