

## Latin American Studies and the Crisis in Scholarly Communication

by

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The crisis in scholarly communication has begun. Librarians have been raising the warning flag for some years, and recently more publishers have started to take notice. Unfortunately, most academics as yet seem not to be aware of what is happening—or, if they are, they are not sufficiently alarmed to do anything about it. But the signs of impending catastrophe are all about us. Consider the following facts:

1. According to the latest statistical report issued by the Association of Research Libraries, over the period from 1986 to 1991 purchases of monographs declined by 15 percent while there was a decline of two percent in purchases of journals. Libraries have been shifting, ever more rapidly, from becoming comprehensive warehouses of scholarly materials to providing access services to materials wherever they are located via fax and electronic delivery. Thus, while library purchases of materials have been steadily declining, their expenditures on document delivery have grown substantially—47 percent for the ARL libraries over this same period. Librarians call this a change from "just in case" to "just in time" supply of materials.
2. Not only have libraries been buying fewer journals, but they have been ever more aggressively engaging in deacquisition of journals. The University of California at Berkeley, for instance, cut over \$400,000 worth of journal subscriptions a couple of years ago. The president of the Council on Library Resources recently reported that, on the basis of a survey of ten universities, it is expected that there will be a threefold increase in cancellations of journal subscriptions in 1992, representing a fourfold increase in subscription dollars eliminated. The projected average for 1992 is 560 titles canceled per university at a savings of \$162,000.
3. From 1986 to 1991 the ARL libraries had to cope with a 72 percent increase in the cost of the journal subscriptions. The projection for 1993 is that these journals will rise in price by about 20 percent more.
4. While libraries are paying more for less all the time, university administrators are trying to save money by cutting support for the editorial offices of journals that are based on campuses and also for their university presses. A substantial number of presses have been informed within the last year or two that their subsidies are going to be eliminated immediately or phased out over the next few years; about

half of the presses at the Big Ten universities have been so informed, for instance, as have some presses at private universities, too, such as Stanford.

5. Meanwhile, the demand for publication by faculty never ceases to increase, and the use of library resources continues to grow. The ARL reports that from 1986 to 1991 the rise in numbers of faculty and graduate students was 16 percent and 11 percent, respectively.

Overall, then, while the demands on the system of scholarly communication have become greater and greater, the resources to sustain it have been significantly reduced.

The crux of the problem lies with the burgeoning growth, in numbers of titles and in their cost, of scientific, technical, and medical journals—what in the trade are known as the STM journals. During the 1980s approximately 30,000 new science journals were launched—four times as many as existed during the previous decade. And every year since 1985 average periodical rate hikes have been twice the consumer price index. An analysis reported in the *Newsletter on Serials Pricing Issues* (September 13) showed the following expected increases in costs for subscriptions to journals issued by two of the leading commercial publishers: 29.3 percent for 33 Pergamon Press journals, with price increases per title ranging from 9.4 percent up to 55 percent; and 32.5 percent for 39 Elsevier journals, with a spread per title from 8 percent to 91 percent. (It should be noted that part of the increase for journals issued by foreign-based publishers like these is a result of exchange-rate fluctuations.) Although subscriptions to STM journals usually cost several hundred dollars per serial, some are considerably more expensive: Elsevier's *Journal of Brain Research*, for instance, costs over \$7,000!

This trend simply cannot continue for very much longer before the whole system of scholarly communication collapses. What we are seeing here is a geometric progression: widespread cancellations by librarians are forcing publishers to increase prices more rapidly to cover their costs, which prompt more cancellations and even sharper price hikes. Recognizing that there is a limit beyond which this progression cannot go, both librarians and publishers have been talking a lot recently about the possibilities for shifting over to electronic modes of publication—and, indeed, over the past few years some dozen or so online journals have been launched, principally on the cheap by individual professors

working out of their offices and taking advantage of the currently free networking capabilities of BITNET and the Internet. Publishers themselves have been cautiously experimenting with provision of their journals in electronic form, in a variety of formats, through a number of different type of purchase and licensing arrangements. Indeed, it is beginning to dawn on many publishers that the printed journal has only a limited life expectancy now. James Kels, Chairman of Elsevier Science Publishers, said at an international publishers' meeting last January that "the traditional journal will survive for at least another decade while we are gearing up" for the electronic future.

But it is not the proliferation of new technology, nor the growth in consumer demand, that is mainly responsible for the emergence of this crisis in scholarly communication; rather, economic constraints are the key. In the September issue of *College and Research Libraries News* Nancy Eaton, director of Iowa State's library, gets to the heart of the matter: "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 changes 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." I agree with James Kels that we have perhaps ten years at most to undertake this reconfiguration, before the current system completely collapses.

Although librarians tend to see publishers—and particularly large commercial publishers like Elsevier and Pergamon (which recently merged to take an even more dominating position in the STM marketplace)—as the villains in this doomsday scenario, in truth publishers are merely accessories to the crime. The real culprits are academics themselves, and most especially academic scientists whose needs for professional achievement and for grant money fuel the process of journal proliferation and expansion. Their "political" power in universities, which derives from their ability to attract substantial outside funding from government and industry that helps pay for a large portion of the operating budget, makes it difficult for librarians to challenge their requests for more and more materials, which in the sciences take the form mainly of costly STM journals. The effect of scientists getting their way is underfunding of the equally valid needs that humanists and social scientists have for scholarly resources. More money spent on STM journals means fewer monographs and journals that libraries can buy to supply those teaching and doing research in the liberal arts. And when librarians, with their backs against the wall, finally reach the point of canceling journal subscriptions,

humanists and social scientists don't benefit either: the "politics" of such cancellation projects, so a number of librarians have told me, dictate that the cancellations are spread across all disciplines, not focused exclusively on the sciences, where journal prices are highest.

A few academic scientists perceive what is happening and are rightly concerned. Let me read you a memo I received recently from a mathematician at Penn State, who is probably more attuned to the current crisis than many of his peers, in part because he has served as chair of the faculty senate's committee on libraries and also as a member of our press's editorial advisory board:

"Journals and monographs are supposed to be about communication, the dissemination of new and exciting ideas. Instead, they have become the vehicle for validating the worth of faculty research, and it's that excess baggage that gets in the way. The most important sharing of new ideas, at least in mathematics, is already taking place over the electronic networks. We are collaborating, sending preprints out for comments, keeping track of what is happening at the cutting edge of our fields through e-mail. The journals are most useful for maintaining contact with what has been happening on the periphery. That service too could easily be provided electronically. Everyone recognizes that there is far too much useless material preserved in print. I pulled a quote off netnews the other day. It's the opening to the article 'What's wrong with this library?' from *Physics Today*, Aug. '88: 'An extrapolation of its present rate of growth reveals that in the not too distant future *Physical Review* will fill bookshelves at a speed exceeding that of light. This is not forbidden by relativity, since no information is being conveyed."

Don Knuth has recommended that before submitting any article for publication, "the author ask whether sharing this information is important enough to him that he would be willing to spend \$1,000 out of his own pocket to see it published. Only if the answer is 'yes' should it be sent in. Most of my own articles would fail this test (there are a few that would pass). This probably doesn't count as contrition, but I think that scientists recognize that we are part of the problem." The future of scholarly publishing, both in journal and in book form, I suggest, depends a lot on the rapid spread of this kind of honest self-awareness among our scientific scientists—and among academics in general.

Having sketched the broad outlines of the structure of this present crisis and its underlying causes, I'd like to discuss more specifically what its effect on university press publishing has been and what it portends for the future of Latin American studies. I'll concentrate here on book publishing because not too many presses currently have a great stake in journal publishing in this particular field.

The key to understanding what is happening is to remember that figure of 15 percent, which represents the decline in monograph purchasing by libraries over the period from 1986 to 1991, as a result of the allocation of an ever greater share of library budgets to STM journal subscriptions. But this process, though more visible now than ever before, has been going on for some time, at least since the mid-1970s. Back in the early 1970s, when I started to build a list in Latin American studies at Princeton University Press, one could still count on selling between 1,000 and 1,500 copies of most new monographs in the field. By the early 1980s this average had dropped to less than 1,000, and by the end of that decade it was moving closer to 500. Let me give you some scientific examples to illustrate this pattern, both from history and from social science. (Princeton did not publish anything on Latin American literature, but I am confident the same pattern would be revealed in that subfield.)

In 1973 Princeton published Frank McCann's *The Brazilian-American Alliance, 1937-1945* and also Dan Levine's *Conflict and Political Change in Venezuela*; their total sales after ten years stood at 1,060 and 1,220 copies, respectively. In 1982 appeared John Humphrey's *Capitalist Control and Workers' Struggle in the Brazilian Auto Industry*, which in ten years sold just 764 copies, 38 percent fewer than Levine's book. In 1983 Princeton published Laird Bergad's *Coffee and the Growth of Agrarian Capitalism in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico*, which to 1992 had sold 1,337—but only 443 of these were hardback copies, the rest being paperback, which had been issued simultaneously with the hardback edition. Bergad's next book, *Cuban Rural Society in the Nineteenth Century*, appeared under Princeton's imprint in 1990, but it sold just 383 copies in two years—and when you realize that about 75 percent of a book's sales in hardback come within the first year or two, you'll know that even in ten years this book will hardly break the 500-copy mark. Some other examples of historical monograph sales of the most recent period, again from Princeton's experience, are: Mary Karasch's *Slave Life in Rio de Janeiro* (1987), 553 copies; Richard Salvucci's *Textiles and Capitalism in Mexico* (1987), 552 copies; Linda Lewin's *Politics and Parentela in Paraíba* (1987), 446 copies; Charles Hale's *The Transformation of Liberalism in Late Nineteenth-Century Mexico* (1989), 749 copies. I might add that these are all first-class books: Karasch's won the AHA's Beveridge Prize, Hale's won the

Bolton Prize, and Lewin's was a Bolton Prize runnerup and also received the AHA's Pacific Coast Branch Award.

Here are some examples on the social science side: Barbara Samuels's *Managing Risk in Developing Countries*, which is a comparative study of the auto industry in Brazil and Mexico, and Frans Schryer's *Ethnicity and Class Conflict in Rural Mexico*, which won the Erminie Wheeler-Voëgelin Prize awarded by the American Society for Ethnohistory, were both published in 1990 and through mid-1992, had sold 782 and 489 copies, respectively. We're talking about pretty small numbers here over which to spread the costs of publication, which inexorably keep climbing at or even above the rate of inflation. As hardback sales continue to decrease, of course, these costs have to be spread over even a smaller number of copies, which means higher selling prices, which in turn meet with ever greater resistance from potential buyers. An option that exists for some books is to issue them simultaneously in cloth and paperback. But this can work only if one can reasonably count on selling a lot more paperbacks to make up for the lower sales of the cloth edition; each paperback brings in only about one-fifth the income that a hardback-copy sale does, so if you anticipate losing sales of 200 cloth copies by issuing a paperback simultaneously, you need to sell about 1,000 paperbacks just to make up that difference. These days it is generally true that a publisher can't break even on a simultaneous publication unless a sale of at least 300 hardback and 1,500 paperback copies can be assured—depending, of course, on price and discount. But some books simply don't have the potential to sell 1,800 copies in any form, and usually only when there is some degree of course adoption potential can a publisher anticipate a sale of more than 1,000 paperbacks.

I want to emphasize that I am sketching general trends here. There are always exceptions, of course, and some books on some subjects, published at just the right time, can do a great deal better than the average. All authors of revised dissertations can only hope to equal the success of Peter Evans, whose *Dependent Development* (1979) appeared at the beginning of the growth period for dependency studies and enjoyed wide adoption sales, amount to nearly 20,000 copies to date (plus over 1,000 copies of the hardback edition sold). And even more recently a historical work of wider than usual interest, like Jules Benjamin's *The United States and the Origins of the Cuban Revolution* (1990) or Piero Gleijeses's *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* (1991), can break the 1,000-copy mark in hardback sales and be successful enough to be issued later in paperback; but it also needs to be noted that both of these books enjoyed the advantage of being positioned among the "general interest" titles at the front of Princeton's catalogue and being promoted accordingly.

These are exceptions to the rule, however, and there are far fewer of them than there used to be.

It also needs to be pointed out that the market for scholarly books differs considerably across disciplines and sometimes even within disciplines. One can safely generalize, for instance, that philosophy books sell better than books in literary criticism, and that books in political philosophy sell better than, say, books in logic or metaphysics. Even within literary criticism, one of the lower-selling fields overall, there are pockets of market success; books that reflect the influence of European theoretical currents, and especially books by writers like Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, etc., sell exceptionally well, way beyond the average. Another area still enjoying higher than average sales is women's studies. A book on Latin American studies that connects with gender studies in some way or another is likely to sell much better than one that doesn't. A good example from Princeton's recent list is Irene Silverblatt's *Moon, Sun, and Witches: Gender Ideologies and Class in Inca and Colonial Peru* (1987), which has sold 483 in cloth and 5,241 in paperback. So, even within a field like Latin American studies, there will be great variance in sales among titles. Publishers are fully aware of these differences among submarkets and will naturally gravitate toward those that have the greatest potential for return on investment, leaving the less saleable subfields more and more to fend for themselves.

Faced with declining sales of monographs to libraries, university presses have come to discriminate more self-consciously among better and less well-selling fields and subfields of scholarship and have also begun to diversify their lists so as to depend less overall on the library market as the main source of income to support their activities. Partly this has been a matter of taking advantage of opportunities opened up to them by the changes in commercial publishing, particularly the mergers that have folded many formerly independent houses like Knopf and Scribners into giant conglomerates and produced pressures for cutting back on the publication of what the trade calls "mid-list" books, those that have potential sales in the range of 5,000 to 10,000 copies—which, of course, for university presses would be considered best sellers. More of these titles are being published by university presses than ever before. At the same time, presses are investing more of their resources and energies in publishing reference works, titles of regional interest, paperbacks with course adoption potential, fiction and poetry, and even some upper-level undergraduate textbooks—all of which provide the possibility of generating income from nonlibrary sources. In the 1980s, one study showed, the effect of this diversification on monograph publishing was disguised because during that period the output of new titles issued by presses grew overall at such a rate that there was no sharp drop in the number of mono-

graphs published. But the next ten years will very likely bring to light a real tradeoff between these other types of publishing and monograph publishing; a quick survey I conducted in 1990 of the ten largest university presses revealed no plans for any further major expansion. Hence, as nonmonographic titles become more tempting to university presses as a more reliable source of income, it is almost certain that some subfields of scholarship will come to the point of being "endangered species," the very lifeblood of those subfields threatened with drying up because of the lack of publishing outlets.

I believe we are fast reaching that point with some subfields of Latin American studies already. Many areas of history, especially colonial Latin American history, are entering into that danger zone now; I expect, but have no direct proof, that Latin American literary criticism is at that brink, too. It won't be much longer before wider circles of scholarship in the field are affected also; as some of my figures above show, it is clear that certain studies in the social sciences are no longer going to be viable for publication. And eventually, perhaps early in the next decade, the entire field may lack for multiple publishing outlets as still exist today.

What will happen if these publishing outlets cease to be available? One possibility is that more publishing about Latin America by North American scholars will be done overseas, in Spain and in Latin America, presuming those countries still have publishing businesses that can survive by issuing scholarly monographs. This seems to be happening to a certain extent already in Latin American literary studies. The disadvantage here is that books published abroad often are more difficult to obtain in this country, and, written in Spanish or Portuguese, are accessible only to specialists (though the increasing Hispanic population in the U.S. may provide some broader market for some of these books).

Another possibility is that LASA itself will take over more responsibility for disseminating the results of research by members of the Association. I had broached this possibility already back in 1989 in an interview that Forrest Colborn taped with me before I left Princeton; it was printed in the Summer 1989 issue of the *LASA Forum*. There I said: "It may be time for LASA to consider setting up a system for publishing manuscripts of scholarly importance but limited market potential that can certify quality, through peer review, and then store these works on microfilm or computer disk, printing abstracts in the *LASA Forum* of accepted manuscripts and providing full text to anyone interested in ordering them." I still think this is an idea that needs to be confronted and discussed at the highest levels of LASA, but I do have some qualms about it, too. My main worry is that if the Association becomes the sole or main conduit for scholarly publication, its monopoly position can impede the

development and circulation of new ideas that challenge the received wisdom in the field. Presumably, any LASA peer review system would be dominated and controlled by senior scholars, who would represent the point of view of the scholarly Establishment. Of course, university press editorial boards also are usually composed of senior scholars. But these scholars don't come from just one field, and their interactions frequently produce a more open-minded environment than one might expect; moreover, the selection of readers is generally controlled by staff editors, who tend to be most interested in scholarship at the cutting edge (partly, but not only, because it sells best) and like to champion controversial work by junior scholars. The structure of university press decisionmaking, then, allows more opportunity for younger scholars to get their works published than I imagine a LASA-controlled system would; and the very diversity and number of presses ensure a greater chance for acceptance than an all-or-nothing Association system would.

Short of reverting responsibility for publishing scholarly monographs to the Association, what can be done? In the very short term presses can take maximum advantage of the economies achievable with modern technology to hold the line on cost increases; desktop publishing systems do offer some hope for keeping costs under control. Even here, however, there are limits to what the technology by itself can achieve; one reason that more savings are not realizable now in using technology to keep typesetting costs low, for instance, is the lack of widely shared standards for text markup—the process of code conversion is an extra cost that has kept many presses from realizing the full benefits of using authors' disks to avoid rekeyboarding. In any event, the technological solution is only temporary, insofar as it is applied to supporting traditional print modes of publication.

What seems to me a more viable answer for the long run is electronic publishing itself, by which I do not mean the use of technology to produce books in printed, bound form. Rather, it would be making available monographic works primarily in electronic form and only secondarily in a printed version. This is a suggestion I made last April to a joint meeting of the heads of the university libraries and the directors of the presses in the Big Ten system, sponsored by the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (a twenty-year-old organization for academic cooperation that also includes the University of Chicago besides the Big Ten schools). I proposed that the Big Ten presses that now publish in Latin American studies—about half of them—start moving some monographs along a different publishing path. The process of peer review would be conducted in the usual manner, and accepted manuscripts would be copyedited as always; but then, instead of being typeset, printed, and bound, these works would be input electronically into an archival database maintained by the Big Ten libraries, whence users could access them through the CICNet within the Big Ten and, via hookups with other networks like BITNET and the Internet, throughout the country at local terminals. Users who wished

to have copies of the work in printed form could download the files and print out copies on equipment like Xerox Docutech, which can produce individual bound copies at a relatively reasonable cost. Certain fees would be charged both for online use and for downloading and printing, which would help the presses and libraries recover their costs for maintaining the system. This idea is now in the process of being worked up into a formal proposal by a subcommittee of three press directors, of which I am one, and a subcommittee of Big Ten librarians; when completed, this proposal will be submitted to a major foundation, which has already expressed preliminary interest in considering this for funding as a pilot project in electronic publishing along with a number of similar proposals, some having to do with journal publishing, also being advanced by university presses.

What will be necessary to make this project work is, first and foremost, the willingness of tenure and promotion committees to begin accepting publication in this electronic form as fully equivalent, on scholarly grounds, to publication in traditional print format. Publishers have long felt that such review committees have overemphasized the physical nature of the published product in evaluating the worth of scholarly work; perhaps the move to this next stage, when the work will be made available in less tangible form than ever, will finally show the senior scholars who serve on these committees how truly arbitrary and unimportant the physical appearance of a work of scholarship is in judging its merit as a contribution to the field. I am not optimistic that this change will happen overnight or, indeed, anytime soon. But we *must* begin this process of reconfiguring the system of scholarly communication, for unless we do, the dissemination of knowledge in this and other fields is going to become very impoverished. Planning for the future needs to begin now!



### New Membership Directory Planned

LASA expects to publish a 1992-1993 edition of its membership directory in mid-1993. Data for the directory will come from membership forms. Members are asked to fill out their membership forms carefully, since other organizations often request aggregate data from us. Please take a minute or two to check over the forms for completeness before mailing them. Please also give thought to specific items such as countries of specialization. We hope to include e-mail addresses for as many members as possible, so if you believe we may not have your current e-mail address, please send it to the attention of Rane Arroyo at the Secretariat. We thank you for your cooperation with this project.