Why Books (still) Matter

Niko Pfund
Oxford University Press, niko.pfund@oup.com

Angela Ko
University of Hong Kong, aywko@hkucc.hku.hk
“Where have all the books gone?” The tempting answer, however pat, is, “Nowhere. They’re all in our warehouse.”

Going simply by raw statistics, however, the question itself seems misguided.

R.R. Bowker recently estimated the number of new titles published in the United States in 2003 at 175,000, almost a 20% increase over the previous year. In just the four years since 1999, when 119,000 books were published, new title output in this country has increased by half. As anyone in the publishing, bookselling, and book review industry will tell you, the problem seems not to be that there aren’t enough books, but that there are vastly too many.

Rather than suggest a healthy book business, this explosive growth is arguably an indication of its core weakness. Increasingly, publishers are having to do more with less, to publish ever larger numbers of titles simply to keep up. And while certain technologies such as digital printing and print-on-demand have enabled us to rationalize sales and satisfy readers whose requests for some titles would not so long ago have been met with “out of stock indefinitely” notices, these technological advances have not compensated for the steady contraction of the institutional library market for academic books.

At Oxford University Press (OUP) http://www.oup.com/us?view=usa which has maintained its output of titles in the last five years this pressure has posed particular challenges for the fundamental gatekeeping function the OUP charter mandates that the Press perform. Even as bundling and “big deals” have siphoned larger and larger percentages of library budgets away from books, what has not changed is the fundamental role and responsibility of a university press to record scholarship and research—and, relatedly, the position the academic book has occupied in the tenure and academic credentialing process.

Nor have the basic costs involved in creating and selling a first-rate academic book decreased. In fact, one might argue that, as initial print runs have gone down, the per unit cost of publishing an academic book has risen. While technological change has certainly resulted in some economies, books must still be edited (often developmentally and structurally edited, always copiededited), designed, typeset, manufactured, marketed, publicized, and sold.

Then, there are the invisible costs of scholarly publishing. Consider just one. Every year OUP spends hundreds of thousands of dollars vetting manuscripts that do not survive the process of peer review and that will never see the light of day. And, those manuscripts that are accepted for publication are often highly specialized works with initial print runs in the low hundreds. To calculate the financial return on such titles as modest is an understatement. However, as a press with an unwavering commitment to publish the best scholarship, regard-
Why Books (still) Matter
from page 20

whether the book hasn’t really lost its punch as a medium? Aren’t people simply reading less?

On the one hand, commentators point to the influence of technology and information overload as a causal factor in diminishing our attention span and reducing our ability and desire to read in a sustained fashion. On the other, phenomena such as the resurgence of book clubs in America and the proliferation of best-selling works of non-fiction in recent years, suggest a populace clamoring for compelling literature and reliable, high-quality analysis as an antidote to our info-bit culture and the increasingly flighty nature of television journalism.

What do these divergent factors mean for the future of the book? To arrive at a semblance of an answer to the book's future, we must differentiate between fiction and non-fiction books, and, even between different levels of non-fiction, since “books” is an impossibly broad term for the purposes of this exercise. Fiction faces challenges all its own and is, by its very nature, a highly unpredictable, mercurial business. By comparison, the publishing of academic non-fiction tends to be more steady and predictable. Leaving fiction out of this discussion altogether, let’s talk simply about that most often debated off-spring of the academy: the monograph.

The Monograph

If not terminally ill, the monograph is certainly suffering from a seemingly incurable malady. Fewer and fewer monographs sell every year and, even when the steady southward trajectory plateaued for a spell, along comes the latest fiscal crisis or round of state budget cuts to imperil already austere library budgets. If we can agree that the act of researching and writing about a given topic is an expository, analytical manner over the span of 150-350 pages continues to be the most sensible and viable way to think deeply about a topic, we then must ask ourselves whether the problem lies not with the format, but with the delivery vehicle.

In an information environment fueled by the ability to search over vast regions of the Web, the book qua book seems increasingly limited. As librarians are quick to point out, students are visiting the library stacks less and less. Who can argue in support of the fundamental inefficiency of physically trudging through individual volumes to conduct research? If the oft-made distinction between immersive content (reading from beginning to end) and extractive content (consulting portions piecemeal) holds true, the academic monograph as a physical object—free-floating, without a direct link to other scholarly entities and unsellable save for an embedded index—seems rather unhelpful, even anachronistic.

While any self-respecting publisher will resist the facile notion that “information wants to be free” (a frequently invoked mantra of the “copyriff”), surely we can agree that it would be beneficial to liberate the information contained within a book from the constraints of its covers. Archives such as JSTOR, for instance, have already demonstrated the formidable research potential of aggregated content. Academic books, and their prospective users, benefit considerably when these books are digitally grouped in a useful and scholar-friendly manner.

Oxford Scholarship Online

To test this hypothesis, Oxford has just launched one of the most ambitious digital projects in its recent history: Oxford Scholarship Online (OSO), an archive soon to include thousands of scholarly books (http://www.oxfordsholarship.com/osobook/public/index.html).

OSO enables users to search across hundreds of thousands of pages of text through keywords and abstracts of books and their chapters. With this added functionality, these books can then behave, in an online environment, much like journal articles, without losing their organic integrity as a sustained intellectual entity (e.g., a complete book). While OSO is still in its infancy, the early signs are encouraging, as the archive has already garnered several awards for its design and user-friendliness. OSO is being used by a host of academic communities around the world, from Calgary to Melbourne, from Texas to Sweden. Usage figures from subscribing institutions suggest that a wide range of scholarly books are being consulted, perhaps affirming the utility of the traditional academic monograph in meeting the needs of faculty and students in this new online format. OSO is also resulting in a dramatic expansion of the audiences who have access to high-level scholarly work, giving further substance to the idea that geographic boundaries impede electronic publishing significantly less than they do print publishing. Specialist institutions, such as religious colleges, are subscribing and making a core collection of religion and theology monographs available. Similarly, universities in Africa and Eastern Europe that would not have traditionally been able to buy these monographs are now subscribing to the entire collection.

OUP is also engaged in a research project, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, intended to explore the feasibility of a multi-publisher online archive consisting of university press collections called "deep backlist" content. The Online Resource Center for Humanities (TORCH) (http://www.libraryjournal.com/ar-
ticle/CA115369我希望有大学出版社、大学、和研究人员同意各个学科之间的不同,以便为未来的研究建立一个有用的框架。

The Future of Monographs

Even as we are constantly—nervously, excitedly—projecting our future and indeed the future of scholarly communication, it seems appropriate to close with a publishing principle that is deeply counterintuitive but absolutely core to the university press enterprise, namely: Quality doesn’t always sell. Good academic books often appeal only to a very small cross-section of scholars within a particular discipline. And, often you simply must publish these books anyway.

At Oxford University Press, we take a conscious effort not to confine the intellectual value of a given work with its commercial potential. I suspect most readers of serious non-fiction would be staggered at the size of the market for even those academic books geared at the general reader, largely because we still equate high-profile print publicity with automatic sales. In fact, every university press publisher has a story (or several) of a book that was favorably reviewed in the New York Times Book Review or the Washington Post or USA Today, and yet did not sell out its modest first printing of 2,000 copies. (Recently, an Oxford book, priced at $35, was named an Atlantic Monthly Book of the Year, in addition to receiving a number of other glowing reviews and benefiting from a vigorous advertising and promotion campaign. All told, the book sold fewer than 700 copies in North America.)

In closing, even as we grapple with harsh realities both old and new, if we surrender our role as advocates for ideas, as champions for authors and their work, as purveyors of the countercultural, the provocative, the unpopular, we risk reducing ourselves to aggregators of content, to a future in which we are a much smaller link in the information chain than we should by rights represent. And, we must safeguard against that tendency, even as we try to invent the future, as we debate the virtues of XML vs. PDF, as we ponder institutional repositories and e-reserves, as we pore over supply chain reports and inventory spreadsheets. The core work of publishing is aided by all these tasks but it must never be replaced by them.

Lyman Newlin. Paul Negri will take over Dover Publications after the retirement of current president Clarence Strawbridge on Oct. 1.

The American Theological Library Association (ATLA), a not-for-profit association of theological libraries and librarians, is pleased to announce the appointment of Margot J. Lyon as its Director of Business Development. Most recently, Ms. Lyon was Director of Business Development and Marketing at Prove Group, LLC, a market-research consultancy.

Simon Dessain (currently COO) has been appointed Chief Executive of Ingenta, PLC. Mark Dewey ( presently CEO ) is taking on a non-executive position on the board. Watch for more news in ATG Dec 04/Jan 05.

That's all we have room for right now! See you in Charleston!