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Recommended Citation
Editor (2005) 'I Hear the Train A Comin' -- Scholarly Monograph," Against the Grain: Vol. 17: Iss. 6, Article 42.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4624

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I Hear the Train A Comin’ — Scholarly Monograph

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In this issue’s column, I would like to catch up with an old friend — the scholarly monograph. Once a mainstay in the academic library, the monograph has been in retreat over the last several decades. In the UK, for example, academic libraries are purchasing 26 percent fewer monographs than they did in the early 1990’s (see http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/Future/crisis.html for a thorough analysis). In the US, longitudinal Association of Research Libraries data indicate libraries are running to stand still — monograph spending is up 76% since 1986, but the number of monographs purchased is basically flat. At smaller libraries, ever-increasing allocations for serials and database products have more severely impacted monograph acquisition.

With the market for monographs contracting, the supply side of the equation has felt the pinch. Fixed costs (printing, binding, etc.) mean that even a modest drop in sales cripples profit margins. The combination of smaller markets and set expenses has prompted some to predict the impending demise of the monograph.

University presses have traditionally been at the fore of scholarly monograph publishing. Some have taken novel approaches to this perceived crisis. For example, the University of California Press has moved much of its monograph operation into the California Digital Library’s Scholarship Repository (see http://repositories.cdlib.org/uclpress/ for details). The American Council of Learned Societies and several university presses, including the University of Michigan Press, Harvard University Press, The MIT Press, and Oxford University Press have teamed to launch The History E-Book Project. This electronic collection of history monographs is available for subscription as a single database. Beyond the

amount of time patrons need for Searching/Gathering will mean maximizing the amount of time we spend on books they need for their classes, and they won’t even make good use of the extra time we’ve freed up for them! If we make things as easy as possible for researchers, the Busy Researchers will reinvest the extra time in Reading, but the Lazy Researchers will simply spend less time engaged in any kind of academic work and more time watching TV and drinking beer. I say, fine; that’s up to them. We’re not their parents. If they choose to slack off, we’re not going to try to stop them — and we’re certainly not going to try to stop them at the expense of the Busy Researchers who genuinely need us to help them cut down on Searching/Gathering time.

This leaves one small problem — well, not small for us, but small for our patrons. The problem is that the Finding/Gathering activity is the one that actually involves librarians. Once patrons get to the Reading part, they’re pretty much out of our sphere of influence; none of the hard work we invest in collection development, cataloging, bibliographic instruction, etc., has much effect on them once they’ve finished the Searching/Gathering process and begun Reading. To suggest that we should do our best to minimize our patrons’ investment in Searching/Gathering so that they can maximize their investment in Reading is to suggest that we should make ourselves less important to our patrons.

Or is it? Maybe, instead, it means that we need to simply focus more of our energy on making the products of our work more transparent and less intrusive on the Searching/Gathering process. The fact is that minimizing the

university press realm, what is intriguing is the recent entry of several new commercial publishers into the monograph space. Why would firms seek to run into the burning building? I spoke with two of them to find out.

NOW Publishers (http://www.nowpublishers.com) and Morgan & Claypool (http://www.morganclaypool.com) were both founded in recent years by executives with long scholarly publishing resumes. NOW Publishers, headed by Mike Casey and Zachary Rolnick, has recently launched its flagship Foundations and Trends (F&Ts) series.
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ries. Morgan & Claypool, the eponymous company of Michael Morgan and Joel Claypool, produces Synthesis Lectures. Both Synthesis and FNT publish 50-100 page papers with a goal of providing a detailed look into a specific topic. The intention is to draw from primary research to present a contextual tutorial, if you will. NOW Publishers has launched seven titles in economics/business and nine in technology. Morgan & Claypool has launched two dozen computer science and engineering series. Each has plans for a rapid expansion.

NOW and Morgan & Claypool each must face up to hardscrabble circumstances of the monograph world outlined above. One way to do this is to, in effect, rebrand the monograph as a sort of journal hybrid. FNT publishes their long papers as “issues.” For example, Foundations and Trends in Technology, Information and Operations Management published “From Filing and Fitting to Flexible Manufacturing” as its first issue, and “From Art to Science in Manufacturing: An Extension of Jakumar’s Study in the Evolution of Process Control” as its second. By positioning similarly-themed contributions as part of a traditional serial, FNT materials are more organic fits for indexing and abstracting services such as EcomLit and Inspire.

Synthesis labels its materials “lectures” and publishes similarly-themed papers as part of a larger “series.” For example, Advanced Probability Theory for Biomedical Engineers is a lecture (a single long paper) that appears as part of the Synthesis Lectures on Biomedical Engineering series. The nomenclature differs from FNT, but the concept of a single paper feeding into a larger corpus is consistent.

A second way in which NOW and Morgan & Claypool differentiate their offerings from traditional monographs is currency. As born-digital documents that pass through a sophisticated electronic editorial process, materials can be published in FNT and Synthesis much more quickly than the bound monograph. This “quick-to-market” advantage is supplemented by the flexibility the digital medium affords. Synthesis Lectures, for example, are designed to be dynamic documents. They may be revised on an ongoing basis, organized by a structured system of editions and versions. Synthesis Lectures also include the potential for a richer presentation using animations, audio files, program code, and so forth. NOW Publishers also capitalizes on born-digital advantages by offering its content in a variety of formats (e.g., HTML, PDF) and provide updates as an HTML overlay. This overlay accomplishes the tricky feat of keeping materials updated while preserving the version of record. Both publishers trumpet the enhanced “discoverability” the electronic medium provides due to Google, emailed tables of contents, and so forth.

The electronic workflow and delivery options change the economics of monographic publishing. The overhead goes beyond the elimination of fixed printing, binding, and mailing costs. Digital files, for example, allow NOW Publishers to offer their customers greater flexibility over how they wish to purchase each monograph. In addition to electronic access via the NOW Website, customers may opt to buy low-cost individual issues in print (priced in the $37.50 to $75.00 range), or as ebooks (via NetLibrary, eLibrary or EBL). NOW’s costs are minimized by typesetting only once, from author input, and deploying cutting edge print-on-demand technology to avoid printing what might otherwise become a large warehouse inventory. Morgan & Claypool has similarly leveraged electronic production systems to reduce costs. Moreover, they have had significant early success promoting their concept of a bundled purchase as a way for subscribers to reduce costs. By offering 100 to 200 lectures in a package, Morgan & Claypool believes it can pass economies of scale on to the customer.

The skeptic might argue that authors will be reluctant to contribute to a strained scholarly form operated by untested companies. Not so, say both Morgan & Claypool and NOW Publishers. They have each achieved success in content recruitment by offering authors a unique opportunity to publish in a forum combining the best of monographs (greater space to explore an issue in depth) and journals (peer review, potentially wide dissemination). NOW has managed to secure authors from Harvard, Stanford, New York University, Princeton, and the Max Planck Institute, among other prestigious institutions. Many of NOW’s policies are designed to appeal to the faculty member who has competing opportunities to publish his or her work. For example, authors retain the copyright to their articles, granting the publisher an exclusive license to publish it in paper and electronic form for commercial purposes. This means authors are able to re-purpose their material for courses or future publications and to self-archive. Perhaps more substantively, NOW pays its authors and reviewers honoraria for the effort they make in ensuring that each issue is of the highest possible quality. Synthesis authors are also compensated for their work, via a royalty scheme. There is a strong demand for up-to-date tutorials on active research especially for classroom purposes. In content recruitment strategy, Morgan & Claypool keys on the fact that a Synthesis lecture can be written more quickly and easily than a traditional book. Especially for the active researcher, a Synthesis lecture project involves a much lower opportunity cost. However, like NOW, authors retain the rights to reuse their Synthesis material to develop a longer traditional book with any publisher they choose.

As I sat to write this column, my head was filled with absolutes. Monographs are a dying form. NOW Publishers and Morgan & Claypool are publishing monographs. By logical extension, NOW and Morgan & Claypool are swimming upstream. In fact, after further contemplation, none of these statements is exactly true. Monographs are not dying. The business model by which they previously thrived is indeed under pressure. However, there is still an audience for more detailed, contemplative analyses than a journal article can provide. The ARL data and the visible hand-wringing at library conferences around the world confirms this. This has created an opportunity to reinvent the monographic business model. Like UC Press’s Escholarship Repository migration and The History E-Book Project, Morgan & Claypool and NOW seek to breathe new life into the monograph by reimagining its business and delivery models. Furthermore, both publishers have chosen to tweak the monographic form as well, to make it more inviting to both authors and readers. Are they swimming upstream? Perhaps. Or perhaps they have found an eddy, where the monographic current is starting to double back upon itself.

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And, guess what, your editor is going to finally get off her duff and finish the fantastic interview with Matthew Brucoli (the brains behind the DLB), coming in the February issue. Stay tuned.

Listen up! Basch Subscription Services recently got top marks in Outsell’s Information Management Benchmark Database. In all areas: overall satisfaction, depth/breadth of coverage, and would recommend Basch came out on top. Congratulations to Buzzy and his team!

Did you know that Carolyn Bucknall the famous Collection Development librarian at the University of Texas at San Antonio is Tim Bucknall’s mother?

So many cards, so many people. Just got another one from the wonderful Paul Ashton <p.ashton@earthlink.net>, remember him?

He was once with Adonis, I think it was, an early Elsevier CD-ROM product. Anyway, Paul and April Ashton now own FocalPlane which is a graphic and Website design service, among other things. http://www.focalplane.com/portfolios7.html

And speaking of wonderful, Greg Tanbaum’s I Hear the Train A Comin’ — SPARC, an interview with executive director Heather Joseph, published in Against continued on page 83

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>