2016

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Recommended Citation
Parker, David (2018) "Blurring Lines--The Chapter, Not the Book, as the Unit of Discovery: An Interview with Laura Brown of JSTOR," Against the Grain: Vol. 28: Iss. 2, Article 18.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7317

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Blurring Lines — The Chapter, Not the Book, as the Unit of Discovery: An Interview with Laura Brown of JSTOR

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Book publishers of all genres: textbook, professional/trade/reference and scholarly have all struggled with innovating in packaging, pricing and distribution. The most forward-looking have emphasized multi-channel and multi-partner digital distribution with strategic attention to preserving pricing power with restricted channel access to their very best sellers and taking different approaches to front-list/back-list and top-sellers versus lower-sellers in terms of available sales models. But, in truth, the majority of book publishers simply pursue a “spray and pray” strategy and hope that the digital revenue line increases sufficiently year-over-year as measured against key competitors.

The book has long been treated as a linear experience/device beginning on page one and ending on page x, all with the assumption the reader finds utility in this “technology.” Popular press titles certainly demand this approach (whether print or digital) but books used in the academy by students and researchers are rarely consumed cover to cover. Digital text-books link key terms in the chapter glossary to the line item entry within the text. Scholarly monographs or collections of contributed works facilitate via the table-of-contents quick links to the chapter of interest. And keyword searching within will take the reader to any relevant section they desire. With all this facility to drill down to chapters, sections, sentences within sections, etc. one would have expected more aggressive publisher uptake on product and business models that are increasingly granular. In my own experience with Business Expert Press, we forged a partnership with Harvard Business Publishing’s case program to align selected chapters from our books with selected Harvard cases; it was a very successful partnership.

Recently, I had the good fortune to finally meet, face-to-face, Laura Brown, Managing Director of JSTOR. As two former book publishers now working in the content aggregation and discovery space, our conversation quickly turned to the challenge of discovery and use eBooks face as compared to journal articles. Laura shared with me a recent simple but effective innovation undertaken by JSTOR to align eBook chapters in search and discovery with journal articles; in effect, disaggregating the book from its linear presentation of page one to page x. This conversation prompted the following interview:

Laura, was there a “light bulb” moment that prompted the JSTOR team to pursue chapter-level discovery?

We were convinced from the outset that including books alongside journals on the JSTOR platform would be of tremendous value for researchers and students. Because we are such a heavily trafficked global platform, with over 40% of our users beginning their research on JSTOR (rather than beginning on Google or elsewhere and then following a link to JSTOR), we believed that by bringing books into the digital workflow, we could help to make centuries of long form scholarship more discoverable and useful.

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At launch, we had decided the best path to
discovery was through preserving the integrity
of the whole book as a research object, and so we
showed books alongside articles in search
results. Over time, our data began to show
that while users were clicking on tables of
content at the rate we expected, they were
not moving through to the chapter level. At
the same time, our user experience research
group had begun exploring the barriers to
students including books in their research
workflow. Two key findings emerged. 1) Many
students held a mental model that books
are physical things and that they would need
to go to a physical place (library) to obtain
one. They didn’t bother to click beyond the
table of contents because their experience led
them to believe that they would not get the
text. 2) Books are long and it would take too
too much time/effort for them to find the portion
of a book that is relevant for them.

This research led us to change our think-
ing. We began a/b testing chapters instead of
books in our search results, and saw amazing
improvements. Not only was there genuine
excitement when students found highly rele-
ant chapter content they could read and use
immediately, but book usage showed a con-
siderable spike. Based on these experiments,
we decided to reengineer our user experience
to make chapters the default search result.

**Why do you think book publishers, in
general, are slow to innovate in packaging,
pricing and distribution schemes?**

I think presses have been experimenting in
many of these areas. They are publishing
short works, making chapters available as
marketing tools, launching new open access
books programs such as UC Press’s Luminos,
and even, in the case of MIT Press, offering
online subscription products such as CogNet
that include books and journals. One problem,
though, is that many scholarly publishers
aren’t big enough to have the resources to
experiment with digital products beyond
journals, and in many cases this experimen-
tation can lead to the sort of disruptions that
threaten their core print business for books.

As a technology partner for both presses and
libraries, and a trusted platform for users, it
is our goal to help build the value proposition
for digital books in such a way that all sides
benefit. We are collecting data and sharing
it with our publisher and library partners so
that this innovation can play out in an evi-
dence-based way, and not as a leap of faith.

**How long has your chapter-level discovery
program been in place and how has this
impacted your eBook DDA program?**

The chapter-level approach to discovery
has been in place for 18 months. From the
outset it showed immediate results in terms
of driving discovery, but as we have added
more titles to the DDA corpus, and more
participating institutions, we are seeing an
enormous rate of growth in books usage. For
instance, just in the first two months of 2016,
even before the semester really gears up, we
are already at 40% of the total usage we saw
last year — a much larger increase than we
would have expected for the program, even
given the number of new titles and the number
of new participants. Libraries appreciate that
they pay only for the books their patrons need
and use, and most participating publishers are
seeing year-over-year growth in the revenue
that they receive from JSTOR (especially
for backlist titles). These trends support our
original hypothesis that, as was the case with
the back issues of journals in JSTOR, there
is great potential to unlock new value for
monographs in a digital environment.

Please describe the basics of your eBook
DDA program.

Most of our titles are available in both a
firm upfront licensing option (“pick and mix”)
and a demand-driven acquisition (DDA) op-
tion. Libraries can shape their DDA corpus
to meet their disciplinary priorities and budget
constraints, and we help them to do that based
on usage stats from their participation in our
journals Archive. Most libraries choose to
give their users access to the entire books cor-
pus. We allow a fair number of usage events
— chapter downloads and views — before a
book purchase is triggered in the DDA option.
Libraries maintain deposit accounts with us
from which triggered purchases are deducted,
and they replenish them according to usage
patterns. We provide weekly stats to them of
usage activity, triggered purchases, and the
status of their deposit account.

**Do you anticipate going even more gran-
ular? Can you envision a day when JSTOR
is selling access to sentences, words?**

Now that we are seeing such promising results from one experiment to get readers
to the information they value quickly, I think
there are vast opportunities for innovation
on both the navigational and business model
fronts to help scholarly books thrive in a
digital transition. The value of content in the
digital environment is at least partly a function
of how convenient it is to access as well as
how convenient (or easy) it is to acquire or
purchase. If you make content easy to find
and purchase, much more of it will be used, and
by many more users than ever before.

A bit of background on the navigation ques-
tion: In a similar vein to the research we un-
dertook with students, a survey of scholars
in their research practices
from my colleagues at Ithaka S+R revealed
an interesting dichotomy in use cases for
books. The study found that scholars tended
to prefer eBooks over print books for basic
research tasks, such as exploring references
or searching for specific topics, but when it
came to immersive reading, scholars preferred
print books. A scholar might use an eBook
as a sort of quick finding aid before turning
to a print copy of the same title to read and
digest the argument. (The S+R study is
available here: http://www.sr.ithaka.org/
blog-individual/stop-presses-monograph-
headward-toward-e-only-future.) So, speaking
in the most reductive way, there’s a “grab
and go,” goal-oriented mode of reading books,
and then there’s a more immersive, cover-to-cover
reading experience. Right now, eBooks aren’t
doing a fantastic job for either reading case.
For the goal-oriented reader, the simple act
of flipping through a printed codex can be
transformed into a frustrating series of clicks
and toggling between different PDF files;
for the immersed reader, the eBook may lack
functionality — such as the ability to annotate
— that we take for granted with print books.

Can we do a better job of satisfying both
needs? Can we design and prototype new
means of navigating books — whether it’s a
topic modeling approach that makes browsing
a book by granular subject terms much easier
to carry out, or an improved visualization of
the place of any given book in the citation
network of books and journals, or some other
innovation — in a way that doesn’t rob
the reader of the opportunity to engage with
the long form argument that plays out in linear
fashion from chapter to chapter? And of

Of course, there’s a concomitant challenge: can we

design user interface improvements that
are scalable and affordable to implement
across the many publishers and tens of thou-

sands of books that a platform like JSTOR
hosts? Those are big challenges, but I see
a real payoff for authors, publishers, and
librarians: improving the navigability of
digital books in a way that makes both reading
“use cases” easier, more efficient, and more
appealing to all levels of readers, including
undergraduate students. And that’s one area
in which I’m hoping that JSTOR can make
some valuable contributions to the community
over the next several years.

I am also convinced that there is room for
experimentation in business models. After
all, DDA itself is one such new development
that, in making scholarly books accessible
to millions of potential readers, and demon-
strating that value to libraries, offers real
potential to revitalize scholarly monograph
publishing. Whether the chapter will eventually
be an alternative “unit of sale,” or something even
more granular, is hard to predict. What I am con-
vined of is that the value proposition for books,
driven by new forms of
discovery and a groundswell of online usage,
is good news for publishers and libraries alike.
Rather than hold on to old expectations and
models, we’ll all need to work together to find
the right models to bring more books to more
users in sustainable ways.