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The Ecology, Evolution and Future of the Monograph

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Introduction

The debate around the future of scholarly monographs has primarily focused on the financial viability and sustainability of monograph publishing. There are, however, more fundamental issues that are changing the scholarly communication ecosystem and the role of the monograph. Digital, networked and open technologies of Web 2.0 are transforming the ways knowledge is produced, communicated and taught, and affecting the expectations of academic authors and readers, and the general public. Cultural meaning is being created and transmitted across societies in new ways: in the era of algorithms, digital networks and social media, authority is not automatically conferred on the intellectual or the printed book.¹ The book may still be the “gold standard” in academia, especially in the humanities and social sciences, but it is no longer sufficient to fulfil the universities’ and presses’ mission of communicating research and ideas to the general public. In its traditional form — as a stand-alone print or digital book — it is also not adequate for academics, who require improved means to facilitate the process of scholarly research, writing, reviewing and reporting.

The Monograph in the Scholarly Communication Ecosystem

The scholarly monograph, defined as “a work of scholarship on a particular topic or theme ... written by a scholar (or scholars) and intended for use primarily by other scholars,”² has been an integral component of the scholarly communication ecosystem. If this ecosystem were a forest, monographs would be mature trees serving as “containers” for long-form writing for “long-term knowledge communication, preservation and curation.”³ Surrounded by smaller shrubs and other greenery, monographs have been one of several forms of formal research output of the typographic culture. Research reports, conference papers and presentations, and journal articles have all played a role in the advancement and communication of knowledge, each with a different function. For example, journal articles are “immediate,” are “good to write to work out ideas in detail,” to “try them out,” “float them,” etc., usually in anticipation of a longer piece of work, i.e., a monograph.⁴

As a result of the affordances of the digital, networked and open technologies, new species and life forms appeared in the scholarly communication ecosystem: blogs, Websites, social networks, social videos, data repositories, mobile applications, and so on. While many of those remain unrecognised in the authorisation and accreditation practices of academic promotion and research funding, they play an increasingly important role in the scholarly communication ecosystem. On the one hand, they act as “media parasites”⁵ preying on

content of formally published works, which may serve as a source of text for tweets, for example. On the other hand, these formal and informal modes of scholarly communication live in a symbiotic relationship. For example, blogs, Facebook and Twitter enable early sharing and testing of ideas, help disseminate them, and provide “a sense of immediacy and topicality unimaginable in the formal context of scholarly publishing.”⁶

These new tools and technologies have been changing the way scholarship is conducted, written and published. The interactive and user-oriented nature of “Web 2.0” technologies has encouraged the development of a culture of participation, openness and sharing, affecting the expectations of academic readers as well as the general public. They have enabled experiments with open peer review, collaborative authorship and the dissemination of the monograph in digital forms and open access mode.

The digitisation of monographs has remained problematic for various reasons. First of all, the print codex remains a better format for what **Paul Fyfe** described as “a complex mixture of nonlinear information uptake, manual annotation, on-the-fly mnemonic indexing, ocular collation, and ambient findability.”⁷ Second, there have been issues with the cost and complexities of obtaining copyright and permissions for digital formats for illustrated books. Additionally, there remain financial, cultural and institutional obstacles to the adoption of digital monographs, especially those released in open access, in terms of quality, prestige, and findability in an online environment.⁸

The delay in the uptake of digital format in the publication of frontlist monographs and the digital conversion of backlist titles has affected their findability online. While journal articles have been integrated into various scholarly databases (such as **JSTOR**), associated with a DOI, and indexed in research analytics platforms, monographs have been left behind. As research workflows have become predominantly digital, if a title is not visible and accessible online, for many researchers and students effectively it does not exist. Eventually, some but not all monographs have migrated online and joined the existing journal content in a number of scholarly databases.⁹ Although this has improved the accessibility and findability of monographs, at the same time it made them indistinguishable from other forms of scholarly output. On the Web, “bookish material tends to dissolve into an undifferentiated tangle of words.”¹⁰ In databases, monographs dissolve into a tangle of chapters.

The Evolution of the Monograph

Even if digital and usefully assimilated into online databases, “[m]onographs remain largely static objects, isolated from the interconnections of social computing, instead of being vibrant hubs for discussion and engagement.”¹¹ **Kathleen Fitzpatrick** and others have postulated that the monograph could and should be integrated into the digital environment in more creative ways than a stand-alone print or eBook. It could be part of a network and ongoing conversation. The publication of monographs could include datasets, Websites, multimedia and software, and provide opportunities to “facilitate interaction, communication, and interconnection,”¹² and measure the dissemination of works on a granular level, similarly to journal publishing, to report back to the universities and funding agencies.

While far from being the norm, experiments in scholarly publishing have resulted in several forms of symbiosis between scholarly monographs and new media, or even new hybrid species, which combine features of a book with those of a blog, a Website, or a journal article.

Blogging platforms have been used in two ways: as a tool to draft the manuscript, and to extend the life of a static monograph. For example, **Martin Weller** used his blog¹³ to draft content and to receive comments and feedback, which he then incorporated into the manuscript,¹⁴ which was eventually published as a traditional monograph. In a more structured approach, **Fitzpatrick** made a draft form of her book *Planned Obsolescence* available for public comment on the **Media CommonsPress** platform.¹⁵ This example of a “networked book,” written, edited and read in a networked environment, emphasises author-reader interaction. The final version was published by **NYU Press** in 2011 and is static, but the draft manuscript remains available online for open discussion.¹⁶ Even if a monograph is “offline,” blogs can be used to keep the content up-to-date and continue the discussion started by the book. Often the book-centred blogs are abandoned, and it is more common to see personal blogs that fulfil this purpose without being tied to a specific title.¹⁷

A monograph + Website hybrid has also become a fairly common occurrence. The ability to post additional content such as appendices, archival material, references, research data, and multimedia elements online can help keep production costs down while adding extra value for readers by presenting the wider context of the author’s scholarship.¹⁸

Monographs released entirely online as HTML files are technically Websites, with the associated loss of boundaries and stability,

continued on page 16



but with the ability to be “continually and collaboratively written, edited, annotated, critiqued, updated, shared, supplemented, revised, re-ordered, reiterated and reimagined,”¹⁹ though they rarely are. The fluidity of the Web contradicts the core nature of the monograph that, by definition, contains discrete and static results of research output. As **Fitzpatrick** argued, “[w]e rely on such stability as a sign of a text’s authority.”²⁰

Less frequent and even more complex is the release of the monograph as an eBook application. With the ability to include multimedia, interactivity and game elements, eBook applications can be used to make difficult texts more accessible and engaging, and hence are a particularly suitable format for educational purposes and general audiences.²¹

In responding to changing reading habits, time and attention scarcity, as well as the fact that in a digital format a book’s length need no longer be defined by the economics of print, several university presses have established “shorts” series, like the Chicago Shorts, Princeton Shorts, Stanford Briefs, and UNC Press E-Book Shorts.²² Typically released only in a digital format (occasionally also as print-on-demand books), these publications are longer than an article but shorter than a book. They can contain excerpts from longer works (focusing on core arguments), archival material or newly written content in response to a topical issue. No longer considered to be “monographs,” they can be published quickly and priced for impulse buying, and they are aimed at time- and attention-poor general readers or students.

These new forms are like evolutionary adaptations of a resilient species. At its core, however, the monograph remains fundamentally unchanged: whether in print or digital format, released in open access or for sale, it remains an extensive and nuanced scholarly piece of writing on a specific subject, which follows scholarly method and purpose, goes through a process of peer-review, is formally published,²³ and participates in the “transmission of knowledge in a typographic form.”²⁴ This stage of ecological equilibrium is undoubtedly kept alive by the institutional and cultural conventions of the scholarly production of knowledge, despite the economic pressures and attention scarcity.

The Future of the Monograph

Looking at scholarly publishing from an ecological perspective allows us to see the emergence of new forms of scholarly communication, and the survival and evolution of traditional forms of the monograph as a result of “the relationships established between technologies, subject, and institutions”²⁵ in the scholarly publishing ecosystem. At present, the monograph is under pressure from challenging environmental conditions, which have been extensively discussed elsewhere, such as the tenuous financial viability of scholarly

continued on page 17

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book publishing, falling readership,²⁶ and the precarious role of the arts and humanities in contemporary society.²⁷ Moreover, the drive to “publish or perish,” the increasing speed of research, and the focus on quantified assessment processes are not conducive to reflection and long-form writing.

As **Tim O’Reilly** said in 2007, publishing is “about knowledge dissemination, learning, entertainment, codification of subject authority.”²⁸ The book is one of many formats that facilitate making knowledge “public,” but not the only one. In the scholarly context, the use of microblogging, blogging and other forms

of digital communication has increased the speed of research and spread of ideas, but at the same time has limited its “chronological reach”²⁹ due to the ephemerality of some digital media. The use of digital media also affected the meaning of content and its impact, as exemplified by McLuhan’s statement “the medium is the message,”³⁰ by encouraging focus on minutiae, specialisation and topicality, and a lack of in-depth reflection. Moreover, electronic media encourage skimming and dipping in and out, affecting the reader’s engagement with content.

While the monograph may no longer be the dominant medium in the transmission of knowledge, I argue that it remains a keystone species in the scholarly communication ecosystem and its survival is vital for the future of

scholarship. As **John Willinsky** states:

The monograph provides researchers with the finest of stages for sustained and comprehensive — sometimes exhaustive and definitive — acts of scholarly inquiry. A monograph is what it means to work out an argument in full, to marshal all the relevant evidence, to provide a complete account of consequences and implications, as well as counter-arguments and criticisms. It might well seem — to risk a little hyperbole — that if the current academic climate fails to encourage scholars and researchers to turn to this particular device for thinking through a subject in full, it reduces the extent and coherence of what we know of the world.³¹ 🌳

Monograph Publishing in the Digital Age: A View from the Mellon Foundation

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Abstract: *In 2013 the Mellon Foundation’s Scholarly Communications program began focusing on how to incorporate modern digital practices into monograph publication of scholarship in the humanities. Mellon is committed to support all stakeholders — faculty, their institutions, the university presses — in setting up a new regime of long-form monographic publishing that best suits not only their demands, but the demands of new generations of digital readers.*



ities? Is publication in the humanities destined to follow the journals model, which amounts to little more than highly priced, print-derived articles in the Portable Document Format that take advantage of few, if any, of the interactive, annotative, and computational affordances of the Web? Shouldn’t scholars and publishers in the humanities address the core issue, which the humanities deans expressed as a profound concern that higher education is failing to reach its core audiences in the online media they are naturally using? Isn’t it time to broaden our view of scholarly publication to include other forms of publication, including monographs?

New Infrastructure for Long-form Publication

The **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation** is a New York-based private philanthropy that supports higher education and the arts. The **Mellon** program that I lead is Scholarly Communications, which supports academic libraries and scholarly publishers. One of our objectives in the Scholarly Communications program is to help incorporate modern digital practices into the publication of scholarship in the humanities and ensure its dissemination to the widest possible audience.

In 2013 we began focusing on long-form research publications in the humanities, and particularly the monograph. As a result of this process, we created a working set of the features of the monograph of the future as we heard it described in our meetings across the country:

1. Fully interactive and searchable online with primary sources and other works;
2. High quality as judged by peers;
3. Portable across reader applications;
4. Able to support a user’s annotations independently of any particular reader technology;
5. Capable of supporting metrics of use that respect user privacy;
6. Reviewed and eligible for disciplinary prizes and awards;
7. Maintained and preserved in its digital form;
8. Expertly marketed, widely accessible, and able to be owned (not rented) by the reader; and
9. Economically sustainable

In 2014, my **Mellon** colleague, **Helen Cullyer**, and I sat in on a roundtable discussion of deans of humanities divisions in about 25 research universities in the U.S. Of the questions that occupied them, one directly concerned the future of the monograph. Wondering how they could make the humanities more interesting to their students, the deans observed that the present generation is immersed in the interactive web of multimedia to a degree that makes it harder for them to appreciate the book-based humanistic traditions.

The Value of Publication in the Humanities

As they wrestled with this key question, the deans explored several aspects of a much larger issue: How do universities best shape the formation, interpretation, and dissemination of knowledge to emerging public needs and media? What features define the quality of scholarly argument? If the monograph is increasingly being challenged as a viable component of systems of scholarly communications, what other genres are needed to disseminate knowledge in the humanities?

For the last 20 years, nearly all the conversation about change in scholarly communications has rather monotonously focused on serials. This discussion has been dominated by the need for open access with its pedantic debates about the meaning of the colors of gold and green. Proliferating funder and university mandates require the development of costly institutional structures of notification and compliance monitoring, and are resulting in guerrilla wars of evasion among various segments of the faculty, who may have even voted for the mandates on their campuses, but believe that they do not — or should not — apply to themselves.

Are these the topics of the conversation that members of the academy really want to be having about scholarly communications in the human-