2016

Reading and Writing Monographs: The Dual Role of Researchers and the Demand for Dual Formats

Colleen Campbell
JSTOR/Portico, Colleen.Campbell@IthakaInternational.org

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Campbell, Colleen (2018) "Reading and Writing Monographs: The Dual Role of Researchers and the Demand for Dual Formats," Against the Grain: Vol. 28: Iss. 3, Article 10.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7356

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
When my elder daughter left home for university last fall, some amount of transformation was to be expected. She, like her younger sister now, is a bookworm — a very hungry caterpillar that I had nurtured for twenty years with a careful diet of literary classics, and the time had come to let her spread her butterfly wings and soar solo into the storm of scholarly resources. It was an unsteady departure to say the least; to save time as she devoured leaves of critical essays in preparation for a battery of last-minute entrance exams, I flew from branch to branch of our public library system to track down crumbling monographs in the editions specified on her required reading list. But she fluttered through admirably and has now alighted in Pisa where she can studiously sip nectar from the flower of academic content — and electronic format, at that!

But abandoning one metaphor for another, like every other concerned parent, I was anxious to know just what she was consuming while off at University. Regrettfully, I had seen evidence of illegal substances circulating in her college: unauthorized photocopies and pirated downloads. Yet when she returned home for semester break, I was both relieved and surprised to see her tucking in to a wholesome diet of (print) academic books once again.

Wanting to understand just how her tastes for monographs were evolving, or at least those of researchers further along but still at the start of their academic careers, I interviewed a group of extremely bright and generous doctoral students in the Social Sciences here at the European University Institute in Fiesole, Italy on their habits and expectations with regard to the long-form scholarly monograph, defined as a “book-length work of scholarship that treats a relatively narrow topic in great detail.” My aim was to gather their spontaneous and wholly unaided reflections and interaction with the material in hand, are merely “artisanal tools” with a limited function and which, consequently, have a limited audience. One researcher described a situation in which he was talking with another researcher about a paper that she had written on a topic that happened to be outside of his own area. The problem was that because the article by nature was limited in length, the author did not include any contextual information on the topic and so it was impossible for him to grasp the significance of her argument. He would have expected a monograph to provide this contextual information.

Looking toward their future, all of the researchers were aiming to develop their dissertations into monographs and all felt an obligation to publish books for career advancement. But from their own perspective as scholars, they truly wish to produce monographs because, in their words, “the monograph is the ideal form in order to address the complexity of the problem I have chosen to analyze.” “When you are addressing a topic, you must be able to clarify your position and provide information that is not central to the argument but which might become central if another scholar wants to dispute it. So you truly need that space to develop and present your ideas.” And, “having a monograph published is a way to make your research known to people outside of your academic field in a way that journal articles simply cannot because they are too narrowly focused.”

Yet, based on the responses I gathered, the primary challenges they face are related to the same obstacle to their reading monographs: time.

“Creating a monograph, aiming at 100,000 words, is a big thing and it is a lengthy process, so certainly producing

continued on page 22
A Researcher’s Perspective
from page 21

a monograph is a challenge. You run the risk of it being outdated or requiring revision as soon as it is published.”

“Today researchers are exposed to an overwhelming quantity of information and multitudes of opportunities for academic debate, so much so that your own ideas can change rapidly. It is so much easier today to travel to conferences where you meet your peers and exchange ideas; we can share perspectives on the Internet, and even simply access ideas by googling. So, you often start with a specific research question and then, as you discuss topics with your peers and learn about their perspective, your focus can shift. In this context, journal articles are more efficient forms of output because they allow you to quickly address an issue and publish in a matter of months, and then move on to a new idea in another article. Such rapid shifts in focus are impossible with a monograph.”

I concluded the survey asking what changes the researchers foresee in the scholarly monograph itself and the paradigm of the book as the touchstone of intellectual output in their fields. Nearly all expressed concern for the monograph, holding to the belief that everybody’s writing and nobody’s reading.

Generally they believe students are losing their ability for deep reading and, whether it is part of the cause or an effect, professors are no longer requiring them to read books.

Information inflation is also a factor that will continue to impact the monograph. One researcher hypothesized that with easy access to information on the Internet researchers run the risk of shaping their research based on what they can discover about their professors’ positions and theoretical approaches, or, even worse, their intellectual interrogation could be stifled as they discover other researchers already developing ideas similar to their own.

Yet despite their concerns, most believed that monographs will continue to be written and published:

“I don’t have a fear that the quality of monographs will decline, but I think that there will be fewer. That may not be a negative thing.”

And as for my own budding researcher off at college, I’ll be happy if she manages to finish her first-year research paper by the end of the term; there is a whole pile of books at home waiting for her to read over vacation.

The author wishes to thank Pep Torn, Library Director of the European University Institute for kindly facilitating the survey.

Monographs as Essays, Monographs as Databases: Or, the Irrelevance of Authorial Intent

by Rick Anderson (Associate Dean for Scholarly Resources & Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah; Phone: 801-721-1687) <rick.anderson@utah.edu>

A

lthough eBooks are now generally a fact of life in academic libraries and have been for at least a decade,1 debate rages on as to the benefits and drawbacks of the eBook format and its strengths and weaknesses relative to print.2 These debates touch on many different issues: the remote accessibility of eBooks versus the reliable permanence of print; the full-text searchability of eBooks versus the easy readability of print; the rights-management nightmare of eBook lending versus the first-sale simplicity of print lending; etc.

But the concerns people express about eBooks aren’t only about accessibility and permanence. Another important issue that often arises in these discussions is a seemingly unavoidable fact: that when it comes to monographs, the books in question represent extended, linear treatments of their topics — treatments that are designed to be read from beginning to end so that their arguments can be followed and absorbed. If this really is a true characterization of the monograph, then it would tend to undermine the value proposition of the eBook format, which is still (despite significant advances in e-reader technology and growing marketplace acceptance) not a great one for extended, linear reading.3 In other words, if an author writes a book as an extended essay, intending that it be read from cover to cover, then does it really make sense for the library to provide it as an eBook?

Others have hashed out this argument from a variety of different angles over the past decade. In this venue, however, I’d like to sidestep that question and pose one that is logically prior to it: when it comes to the value proposition of a scholarly monograph, how much does the author’s intent actually matter?

To be clear, I’m not talking about “authorial intent” in the sense used in reader-response criticism, which places the reader’s interpretation above the author’s intent when it comes to determining the meaning of texts. I’m talking about the author’s intentions with regard to how the book will be used. In other words, it may well be that the typical author who produces a scholarly monograph does so with the hope and expectation that it will be read in a more or less continuous manner, from beginning to end, and organizes his or her text accordingly. But what if that’s not how the book’s users — and I’m using that term deliberately here, instead of the term “readers” — make use of it?

This question clearly begs two more: if people aren’t using scholarly monographs for extended, linear reading, what are they using them for? And should such uses be encouraged by librarians?

An answer to the first of these two questions is suggested by recalling what all of us who attended college in the pre-Internet days used to do when we wrote research papers in our humanities or social-science classes. Very often, we found ourselves in the library’s book stacks pulling relevant texts from the shelves and bringing them, in pairs or larger groups, to the library’s work tables. Depending on the topic and the required length of the paper, we might have had anywhere from three to thirty books on the table before us. And how did we use those books — did we sit down and read them from cover to cover? Almost certainly not, at least not in the great majority of cases. Instead, we searched them for the chapters, pages, and passages that would help us complete the intellectual task at hand. Basically, we text-mined these books (though that term didn’t yet exist), trying to pull the “signal” of relevant text from within the “noise” of text that was irrelevant to our immediate needs.

Of course, in this context, given the laughably crude indexing tools available to us during the print era, our searches tended to be laborious and inefficient. Worse than that, they were ineffective — our access to the book’s content at the word or phrase level was limited by the granularity of the index, assuming that we were fortunate enough to be using a book with an index. In such cases, we were using these books as if they were databases. For most of us, especially during our undergraduate years, this kind of activity characterized a great deal of our use of library books.

Of course, we had another option if we wanted to search a book at the word or phrase level: we could read the whole thing. It’s not that print books aren’t full-text searchable — it’s just that print books are only full-text searchable at a tremendous cost of time and energy. In other words, printed scholarly monographs make great books, but they make terrible databases. And yet an awful lot of the use we made of those printed monographs in the pre-Internet days was as databases. The fact that they contained extended, linear, well-developed arguments was incidental to their usefulness to us as researchers. For us, what was centrally relevant to their usefulness was continued on page 24