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

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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. Regretfully, 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 relevant perspectives on the monograph and its future, not least because of the unique position they hold as students reading books who will very soon be authors.

The interviews, conducted with researchers from fields of sociology, political science, law and history, highlighted significant challenges that they encounter both as readers and writers of monographs, taken from their practical experience in preparing their dissertations. And yet, throughout the interviews, they all expressed a veritable passion for the monograph and high hopes for producing and disseminating their research in this form of scholarly output.

When asked how important books were to their research, with respect to other forms of scholarly communication, such as journal articles, blogs, etc., there was consensus that monographs are absolutely essential to their work. Pressed on what their objectives were when reading monographs as opposed to journal articles, for example, one researcher explained that, from his perspective, "a journal article really functions as young seedling that will develop into a book, so it serves a specific and necessary function. The monograph provides comprehensive treatment of a given topic or a comprehensive answer to a specific question and is the final product of a long research process." Another offered, "As a sociologist, I need to understand the methodological approach of a study, so the appendices are, of course, important, but I also look at the actual narrative, or progression of the author's argument from its presentation and development to its resolution." And yet another, "monographs have greater weight, because they are the result of in-depth research over time and have undergone a thorough review process. They constitute comprehensive treatment of a certain topic or an exhaustive answer to a certain question presenting the other literature, essential background and context of a topic."

Having established the fundamental importance of monographs in their work, I then questioned the researchers on how, exactly, they interact with them, i.e., how much deep reading vs. scanning they did, and whether they interacted with print books and eBooks differently.

The responses immediately brought to light the contrast between their preference for monographs and their actual use of them: "I read the introduction and the conclusion of a book before deciding whether to actually read it." "I may read one book for every ten I scan." "As it is now, I only read a whole book when I am writing a book review." But one researcher goes on to explain, "That is, in fact, one of the problems with academia today — we just have no time to read monographs, but at the same time you are expected to publish one. There is such a vast amount of literature, and you are expected to have a certain understanding of the main monographs being published in your field and to keep up with the general literature as well, but it is impossible to read it all!"

Yet when they do read, researchers noted a few advantages to reading eBooks as opposed to print, such as search functions and the convenience of having all of your sources at your fingertips when traveling, but overwhelmingly showed a preference for print: "Using print books is extremely important because you understand the weight of the knowledge that you are being exposed to. When I walk with ten books in my hand, I really understand the significance of what I am working with, whereas working with content online, I have no understanding of how many different sources I am using. It is an extremely abstract universe — I have no sense of how much information I am using and it prevents me from understanding the size of the argument or issue that I am trying to investigate." Not unexpectedly, researchers said they spend more time on a book if it is in print and use eBooks for rapid scanning; "reading a print book I can think about how the author writes and reflect on the structure of his argument."
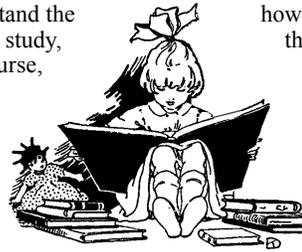
When asked to consider what particular advantages monographs have over other forms of scholarly output, the clear answer was that there is more space to develop a research topic, illustrate the research tools, and the background and context of an argument in a monograph. Journal articles, on the other 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

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. 🐦

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

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Although 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[3]) not a great one for extended, linear reading.[4] 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 piles, over 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