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## Monographs as Essays--Monographs as Databases

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 You run the risk of it being outdated or requiring revision as soon as it is published.”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

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*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](mailto:rick.anderson@utah.edu)>

Although eBooks are now generally a fact of life in academic libraries and have been for at least a decade,<sup>1</sup> debate rages on as to the benefits and drawbacks of the eBook format and its strengths and weaknesses relative to print.<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>3</sup>) not a great one for extended, linear reading.<sup>4</sup> 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

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the fact that they contained specific, discrete chunks of relevant and (we hoped) reliable information. In other words, the value proposition of these monographs *may or may not have had anything to do with the use intended by their authors.*

To answer the second of the above questions — should this kind of use be encouraged by librarians? — I must confess that as a librarian myself, my knee-jerk reaction is to regard someone who doesn't want to read the whole book (especially when the whole book is a scholarly monograph) as intellectually lazy, as someone unwilling to do the hard work required to create a high-quality scholarly product. But obviously, to respond this way would be fundamentally wrongheaded. It would be to say that the only appropriate thing to do with a book written as a monograph is to use it as a monograph — that using it as a database is somehow less worthy, or less scholarly. But no one, I think, really believes that the only correct way to write, say, a ten-page undergraduate research paper with a minimum of twelve monographic sources is to read twelve monographs from cover to cover. And even if anyone did believe that, it wouldn't matter. It would not happen, for the simple reason that it's ridiculous. Undergraduate education is not structured to allow students to invest weeks of dedicated reading in the production of a ten-page paper, nor should it be. There are assignments that should (and do) require that kind of reading, and others that don't, and there's nothing wrong with that.

But here's the even harder truth: when it comes to making format decisions in libraries, we need to be guided by more than just what we

believe (rightly or wrongly) our patrons ought to do. We have to take into account what they are *demonstrably willing* to do, and when we can't determine with scientific rigor what it is they're willing to do, we have to try to figure out what they're most likely to be willing to do. Because the bottom line, I think, is that readers — whether undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, or anyone else — are going to use books in the ways that make the most sense to them, for better or for worse, no matter how hard we try to convince them to do otherwise. In any particular case they may make wise or unwise use of the books we provide, but if we truly value our patrons' intellectual freedom we have to give them the leeway to use them as they see fit — and in any case, our ability to judge their wisdom is limited and we should probably maintain some professional humility in that regard.

So what does an appropriately humble approach to book formats, one that is informed by what can reasonably be known about patron preferences, look like? Obviously it will depend, and will vary from library to library. In order to fashion such an approach, each of us should be asking ourselves questions like these:

What are the long-term trends in circulation of printed monographs in my library? (These will tell you something, though not everything, about whether and how your patrons' format preferences are changing over time.)

What are the long-term trends in in-house use of scholarly monographs in my library? (Books that are used in-house are almost certainly not being read from cover to cover, unless you're open 24/7 and have noticed patrons sitting at the same table for days on end.)

Are my patrons using different types of eBooks in different ways? (We all know that

eBook usage data is a horrendous mess, but often it's possible to detect broad-stroke trends.)

Recognizing that two patrons might want to use the same monograph in radically different ways, how open are we to the possibility of buying books in multiple formats? (This gets tougher to justify as our budgets shrink, of course, but it probably isn't something we should reject as a matter of inflexible policy.)

Notice that none of these questions is "How do I believe the authors of these books intend them to be used?," because truly, it doesn't matter — not when it comes to figuring out what to give our patrons and in what formats. When it comes right down to it, as librarians, we don't really serve scholars in their capacity as purveyors of books already written; we serve them in their capacity as researchers and authors of future books, and we want to support them in that capacity in whatever way works best for them. 🍄

### Endnotes

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## Why Monographs Matter

by **Geoffrey Crossick** (School of Advanced Study, University of London) <[geoffrey.crossick@london.ac.uk](mailto:geoffrey.crossick@london.ac.uk)>

In 2015 I published a report for the Higher Education Funding Council for England that assessed the implications and challenges for monographs of the trend to open access publication.<sup>1</sup> In the UK open access was becoming increasingly compulsory for recipients of public research funding. For that reason it seemed to me important to think not simply about the technical and policy issues involved in requiring monographs to be available through open access but about the fundamental question it raised for those concerned for the generation and communication of new knowledge in the arts, humanities and social sciences. That question was why the monograph was im-



portant in a broad swathe of disciplines and whether it was in crisis as was often claimed (more frequently in the U.S. and Australia, it should be noted, than in the UK). Technical policy solutions can end up damaging the research and communication that it is meant to support, and we needed to know why the monograph mattered. In a world where research quality was increasingly measured in terms of citations and journal impact factors, should we be concerned if the humanities in particular followed what seemed an inexorable trend towards peer-reviewed journals as the main way to get research known and read?

The conclusions were striking. The monograph is not without problems but it contin-

ues to be important; academics value it deeply as authors and as readers, and UK publishers are producing them in ever-increasing numbers. So, when science subjects had gone entirely over to journal articles and refereed conference papers, to the extent that in the UK's recent Research Excellence Framework journal articles constituted 98-100 percent of outputs submitted from science subjects,<sup>2</sup> why was that not happening in the arts and humanities? Journal articles ranged from 17 percent of outputs in Classics up to the highest by far, Philosophy, with 60 percent. Most others lay somewhere between the two. People get their research to a wider academic and non-academic readership in a variety of ways, and books continue to be the single most significant form: amongst them collections of essays by different authors on a single research theme,

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