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'The Returned': on the future of monographic books

This article evaluates the current state of academic book publishing based on the findings of the Hybrid Publishing Lab's business model research. With students relying more and more on Google and Wikipedia, the role of books within today's university studies is a difficult one. From the perspective of publishers, open access (OA) embracing the digital is seen as one potential way to bridge this gap between online search engines and traditional monographs. To illustrate this further, the article delivers an overview of its findings, which highlight changes in academic publishing: publishers have switched their emphasis from delivering a product to creating a service, whereby the author rather than the reader becomes their most focused-on customer. Research frameworks, funding and conventions about academic careers, however, often still need to adjust to this new development. If these frameworks acknowledge and foster OA publishing, and new experiments with collaborative book productions flourish, the monograph will have a future.

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2013 was an important year for the digitization of the academic monograph, and the good news is: all research we conducted at the Hybrid Publishing Lab indicates that the monograph will have a future. While the monograph has been ignored for a long time, things have now begun to change. Especially in the last two years, professional publishers, new digital presses, and a range of publishing experiments have embraced the digital future of the monograph. Open access (OA), this interesting crossroad of technology, knowledge and public interest, has reached book publishing, not least thanks to the long-awaited arrival of new business models.

The EU-financed Hybrid Publishing Lab is situated at Leuphana University in Germany and is investigating the monograph at this crossroad with a special focus on scholarly communication in the humanities. Together with technology companies, publishers and research experts, the living Lab studies the digitization of books by following the interaction of knowledge technologies with business interests and researchers' preferences, and by exploring new techniques for collaboration and distribution. Some of our findings are shared below.

Under threat of violence

To begin with, it must be said that studying monographic books is rather complicated: as researchers, we find ourselves faced with a highly disputed tool. Opinions about what constitutes the essence of a book are deeply divided, and not only within broad academic communities but even within single disciplines: Robert Darnton, Professor of History at Harvard and the Director of its University Library, indicates that "new technology can make it possible to realize an old ideal, a *republic of letters* in which citizenship extends to everyone"[1]. Robin Osborne, Professor of Ancient History at the University of Cambridge, on the other hand, states that open access "makes no sense" because "academic research publication assumes some prior knowledge" and is "a form of teaching"[2]. This conflict of opinion shows that we are not just dealing with the disruption of a specific medium – books – but rather with questions about who and what a book is for. Even in the natural sciences, where journal articles have been the more relevant medium for the newest research findings (with citation indexes published since 1961)[3], until recently, students still turned to books for learning the basics. With the rise of the internet, this has changed. What is the role of the monographic book today?

Looking at submissions for the UK's Research Assessment Exercise from 2008, Nigel Vincent has argued that humanities disciplines are the only ones left where the production of monographs is still relevant.[4] A more recent analysis of the Austrian Science Fund came to the same conclusion.[5] However, there are signs that the role of the monograph is changing within the humanities too: we see this even among our students who, when asked to read a monograph for their studies, usually complain with disbelief: "…a whole monograph?" Several interviews conducted by the Hybrid Publishing Lab with publishers clarified the form of this crisis. An independent publishing house in Germany, which has successfully operated in the field of literature, contemporary philosophy, and art theory since 2001, said that a book by a well-received philosopher like Alain Badiou, for example, currently sells only about 400 copies, while ten years ago, the same edition would have sold 1,000. The conclusion of the publishing house was clear: "It's not the book which is at the heart of the university any more"[6]. Instead of books, Google and Wikipedia are now the most important tools of a student's research. As we will see in the following paragraphs, the business model research conducted by our Lab seems to confirm this perspective.

"… Google and Wikipedia are now the most important tools of a student's research."

Where does the money go?

One of our interests was the response of publishers to digitization and open access in their daily operations. Here, more often than not, we observed an explicit reorientation: most academic publishers have come to embrace the digital potential. In fact, digital revenue numbers from bigger corporations are often quite promising. In the US, the digital revenue of academic publisher John Wiley & Sons now accounts for more than half of its earnings; driven by e-books, it was up 40% across Wiley's different arms.[7] Open access still only represents 1% of Wiley's total revenues, but this 1% is actually a significant sum of $3.9 million.[8] Looking at the efforts of other large publishing houses like Palgrave Macmillan, Taylor & Francis, Springer, de Gruyter, Reed Elsevier and others, one can conclude that in general, efforts have been redirected from 'creating and selling a product' to 'delivering a service'; a service which is pitched to the reader as well as to the author. Thus, OA – and the article processing charge (APC) which often accompanies it – is a revenue model which publishers take seriously.

In 2013, publishers like Palgrave Macmillan and Springer announced the equivalent APC for OA monographs for the first time, which is good news. The bad news: it's costly. For a monograph, Palgrave Macmillan states an open access publication charge of £11,000 or US$17,500, including a CC BY Licence, excluding VAT[9], and at the Open Monograph Book conference at the British Library, a Springer spokesperson announced a sum in a similar price range, at €15,000 or around US$20.000.[10] Our research at several university presses has shown that the cost of producing a book is high, though maybe not to this extent. Considering all working hours to be paid and calculated, we currently consider the costs for an OA book to be about £8,000 (nearly €10,000 or US$13,500) on average (first copy costs, print, dissemination). In October last year, OAPEN-NL arrived at a similar figure. Their average cost of publishing a hybrid monograph in the Netherlands is slightly over €12,000; approximately half of this amount is spent on creating the first digital copy.[11] The Austrian Science Fund came to a comparable conclusion and is funding stand-alone publications with a lump sum of €14,000.[12] Leaving the current lack of funding aside, this price triggers substantial change: the author, rather than the reader, becomes the customer. And with this, the perspective of publishing houses is shifting. When my colleagues Armin Beverungen and Helge Peters conducted a range of interviews with publishers from the UK and Germany, they noted a different terminology indicating new ways of thinking about publishing. Publishing houses and academic authors traditionally had a mutual interest: the excellent work of an author helped the publisher to sell books to the reader, while the publisher (or its marketing department) often carefully cultivated a portfolio of works by reputable

"… efforts have been redirected from 'creating and selling a product' to 'delivering a service'."

authors to enhance the prestige of each individual book. When digitization reached books and publishing, however, there was a significant shift of terms. Talking to various CEOs, Beverungen and Peters noted that manuscripts were no longer exclusively addressed as 'work' but also regarded as 'content'.[13] By viewing manuscripts as 'content', the relation between author and publisher is reconfigured. As 'content', a manuscript must pass the test of marketability across different markets and channels, and open access becomes primarily a marketing issue rather than a question of public interest. Consequently, one could say that hi-tech publishing is addressing a new stakeholder. Publishing is no longer just pitched at the potential reader or to students in libraries: it is also pitched at researchers who nowadays have to publish more often creating a crisis of knowledge that is becoming, as David Weinberger puts it, "Too big to know"[14].

> "… OA becomes primarily a marketing issue …"

Looking for keywords, finding unbound books

Viewing manuscripts as content introduces a shift within publishing: instead of selling the content as a specific product ('the book'), digital books can now also be sold in a bundle or as a subscription ('content package'). In fact, monograph business models have recently converged with those used for journals: as Ros Pyne, Senior Digital Development Editor at Palgrave Macmillan, said in a blog discussion: "most institutional sales of e-books are now handled on a subscription basis, much like journals"[15]. This is why Palgrave Macmillan has started the digital platform Palgrave Connect, pitched to institutions and libraries. On platforms like these, institutions buy 'content packages', or collections, or curate their own. The effect on the monograph: instead of marketing a single book to sell more, larger publishers now tend focus on scale and treat books as group material. This diminishes the importance of the author's name on an individual book – it is the package, not the reputation, that sells a book. This is why book chapters now look like a journal articles, and begin with a summarizing abstract and search-engine-friendly keywords: *discoverability,* not reputation, has become a key aspect of getting a book to the end user.

Pushing the digital discoverability of a book as a new form of distribution might help smaller publishers: today's students, much like most researchers, use search engines as a means of getting knowledge. In delivering their content directly, smaller publishers become less reliant on libraries. Of course, this does not mean that those cathedrals of concentration will become obsolete. On the contrary, getting into the library catalogue may soon be a significant sign of good reputation for an individual title.

In this context, our Lab observed another interesting tendency. Books have always had indexes, but the ability to search content clearly destabilizes the direction of the book: it is no longer perceived as something with a beginning and an end. Creating multiple entry points into a book to draw in readers has become an interesting challenge for publishers. The book designers of the Hybrid Publishing Lab are currently experimenting with new forms to interpret the table of contents: we consider how the entrance points to a digital book can be increased, for example when the content of the chapters is not presented in a list but spread over a whole page with keywords and pictures indicating at one glance what is to be expected.

> "… *discoverability,* not reputation, has become a key aspect of getting a book to the end user."

Digital experiments with monographs, however, have also shown the limits to a book's transformation into content. Two experiments have been influential on the approach of our Lab: the 'Living Books About Life'[16] series, and the 'book sprint'.[17] Living Books About Life is a crucial experiment which pushes the borders of what a book is. The series editors invited academics to explore the potential of open access by curating available science research around selected topics. Within seven months, 21 'Living Books About Life' were created. Using a Wiki page, the content could be annotated, edited, added to, remixed and reused by readers. Discussions with the books' editors, however, also showed that books in the digital realm still need borders. For a digital file to be identified as a book, it needs to have a cover, and its content needs to be 'frozen' (as a digital equivalent of the printing process).[18]

While the Living Books series explored the role of the author as a reader and the reader as a user, the book sprint sets the focus more on real time collaborative work: a group of experts produce a book within up to five days, from concept mapping, structuring, writing the content, editing and composing the content, to finally its publication. New experiments like these help us to understand that writing a monograph is indeed a process whereby knowledge is shared and reviewed. To emphasize this, the Hybrid Publishing Lab is experimenting with an extended edition notice in the beginning of books similar to the closing notes of a movie, which would name the participants engaged in processing the manuscript.

Conclusion: on funding collaborative OA monographs

The term 'monograph' can be defined as 'a detailed written study of a single specialized subject topic'[19]. In the past, this generally meant *a single author* but this convention is not set in stone. Digital technology enables new forms of communication. Convincing arguments about the value of a new 'spirit of collaboration' to researchers have been made in Kathleen Fitzpatrick's *Planned Obsolescence*[20] and in Gary Hall's *Digitize This Book*[21]. We must also bear in mind that technologies have always changed the nature of study in the humanities. The German media scholar Friedrich Kittler, for example, has demonstrated how writing technologies have shaped arguments in the field of philosophy; when books superseded scrolls, they also introduced text comparison which led to a new, more textual logic.[22] But we must also remember that new technical possibilities are just part of what shapes academic content production: there are other important issues such as research frameworks, funding and conventions about academic career progression. As technical changes disrupt research methods and academic knowledge, in the future we might want to reward a different type of monograph.

It is a fact that OA monographs are costly. It is also a fact that researchers complain about too many unnecessary publications. Rewarding the collaborative production of monographs could be an interesting alternative, which should be further explored. Unfortunately, we still lack outlets for an accomplished collaboration: the edited collection, for example, too often consists of several texts focusing on the same topic but without any further connection. In the digital era, we need to ask ourselves if the skill *to think on one's own* can be developed further into the skill *to think with someone else.*

As a matter of fact, methods of handling text interpretation have recently started to explore this. Instead of *thinking against* (with the aim to find mistakes), gender studies has developed the approach *to think with*, interested in the interferences happening when reading one text through another, a method which follows Donna Haraway's and Karen Barad's approach to 'diffraction', further developed by Iris van der Tuin into a 'diffractional method'.[23] This is an interesting option, which means standing on the shoulder of another in order to share the view.

"… standing on the shoulder of another in order to share the view."

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