

Death of the Book?

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A. Crisis? What Crisis?

The academic book market is in a crisis of over-provision; certainly not a crisis of demand.

But there must be a crisis. I looked up the term “scholarly publishing crisis” on Google and found 36,000 references to it worldwide, 7,600 in Australia. Then I looked up “publish perish” and found 54,000 entries worldwide, with 4000 in Australia. There were even 1670 “publish perish jokes” (none funny enough to poach).

If there’s a crisis, there must be villains; the evil people we can blame. I have isolated three categories of these.

1. Academics

Academics are hurting libraries.

- ❑ They want libraries to be comprehensive, and see them as a “public good” or utility, but they don’t bear the costs (and cost increases) of what they order directly;
- ❑ Books are published for the benefit of the author – academic books are not part of the book trade, but part of the economy of tenure and promotion, esteem and reputation;
- ❑ Academic specialisation leads to more works being published in ever narrower fields, which naturally involve fewer readers the more specialist they become – more books and fewer readers means fewer readers per book;
- ❑ Academics are consumers of books, but do not bear the costs of market failure – they don’t even pay for books if they can help it (they use much ingenuity in acquiring books via libraries, inspection or review copies, using research budgets or even the Corporate Amex – anything but their own cash).

2. Publishers

Commercial publishers – as opposed to University Presses – are both good and evil.

- They are *evil* because they represent a general tendency where value is produced in public institutions, but wealth is privatised. In other words, Universities and Research Councils fund (invest in) academic research, but Universities then have to buy back the results of that research from commercial book and journal publishers, whose profits can be surprisingly robust:

To put these margin into perspective: the average gross operating margin of the BRW Top 1000 companies in Australia in 1999 was 16.4 per cent, a margin exceeded by most international publishers. In terms of Australian companies, we have to go to Telstra with an operating margin in 1999 of 30.3 per cent and the Commonwealth Bank at 39.1 per cent to find margins like those enjoyed by the major commercial publishers.

(Houghton, 2000, p. 66)

- Commercial publishers are *good* because they are less squeamish than university presses, but they can be more influential. An example shows what I mean: it's a book called *Hop on Pop*, published by Duke University Press. I have a chapter in it (Hartley, 2003). The book has just been published and my copy arrived this week, in March 2003. I completed the first draft of this paper in 1994 and the *revisions* requested by the editors in 1996. Since then, one of the best things I ever wrote has been waiting in line, unpublished, for seven years, while the entire collection went through two successive peer referee processes for Duke, neither of which asked for changes in my chapter (apart from my institutional affiliation, which changed three times during that period, so now the chapter doesn't even count for DEST purposes!). Meanwhile, a commercial publisher like Routledge or Sage, with whom I often do publish, can get a book out in nine months. If it's lucky such a book can stake out some new territory and contribute to the shaping of the field. It may make more impact on the growth and direction of the field than a more rigorously refereed publication, because of its timeliness. The moral of this story? Our preference for peer reviewed scholarly publication may be against the best interests of scholarship; conversely, "quick and dirty" commercial publication can revitalise the field and teach students up to date materials, all at once.
- Commercial publishers are neither good nor evil, of course, but they do work to demand rather than supply. However, demand is hopelessly distorted by restrictive practices and captive markets, where the interests of those who *use* scholarly books – readers, students – are given lowest priority:
 - **Adoption:** The demand for particular books comes not from students but from lecturers and tutors;
 - **Journals:** The demand for scholarly journals is driven by provision, not readership (see section A1 above);
 - **University Presses:** The demand for University Presses comes from institutional desire for "brand" prestige and for regional boosterism: they are "vanity presses." They don't publish their own faculty's books, and are increasingly reliant on trade lists rather than scholarly publishing. They are immune to demand expressed by readerships.

3. Readers

The time has arrived when it is possible to identify a number of textual systems where *writers outnumber readers*. I've identified three such textual systems:

- ❑ **Poetry** is one such system – far more poetry is written than ever is read, even by the authors.
- ❑ Another such system is the **website**. Not even the author's proud parents read most of these, because they can't manage the technology.
- ❑ And of course **academic publishing** is a third such system. There are – I claim – more writers than readers of scholarly publishing (Hartley, 2000, p. 43).

There's a requirement on academics and scholars to *utter*, but none to *hear*; to transmit but not to receive; to speak but not to listen. Value is said to come from the use or impact of research, which is measured by the fact of publication. Cues to that value include the prestige of the author, institution, publisher and citation. All these markers of value are incentives to *publish*, not to *read*.

The democratisation of education has expanded that incentive to all those working in Higher Education – a massive increase in absolute numbers, given the extension of HE participation from two or four percent of the population in the 1960s to thirty or forty percent now. Some part of the call to restrict scholarly publication may be attributable not to the honourable motive of seeking to preserve quality, but to the much less noble desire to keep out the riff raff. The best test of worthiness in this context is direct demand by readers. Is this why they're not allowed a look in?

B. Solutions

We need to read, to listen, to receive, because the problem has been addressed by wiser folk than I. The Americans have sorted this all out. See in particular *Policy Perspectives* (1998), the journal of the Institute for Research on Higher Education in Philadelphia. In March 1998 they published a special issue called *To Publish and Perish*, co-sponsored by the Association of Research Libraries, Association of American Universities and the Pew Higher Education Roundtable. Most of what follows is recommended by them. They conclude that: "We think the risks of doing nothing substantially outweigh the difficulty of doing something and doing it now!" That was five years ago.

1. Tenure, promotion, provision

- ❑ Resist requirement for "tonnage" – consider "4 or 5 *best*" publications for tenure or promotion.
- ❑ Separate certification (i.e. promotion and tenure evaluation) from dissemination (sharing new knowledge). Leading" journals already are doing the job of "advancing knowledge": the number of "leading" journals in many fields has remained much more stable than the overall number of journals. The crisis of

over-provision is not driven by *the advancement of knowledge* but by the *advancement of careers* via publication in ever more specialist journals.

2. “Agile Libraries” – selectivity, concentration

- No-one can collect everything; solution lies in creation of a single market – led by the American university libraries working as one market, not scores of competing, comprehensive organisations where even the largest is no match for the publishers.
- In Australia, there are 50 University libraries: why not one?

3. Rethink Copyright

- Currently copyright works to transfer “profits” from public investors (Government, universities) to private publishers (when authors assign copyright in their published works directly to publishers as required by most journals); and to private individuals (when authors retain copyright in their books).
- Meanwhile, costs are being transferred in the opposite direction. Universities and authors themselves (working during university time) are increasingly responsible for:
 - Boards, editors, referees
 - Editorial/design process
 - Marketing
 - Processing, storage
 - Subsidies

4. Electronic publication

Before I do what is expected of a dean of a Creative Industries faculty and say that whatever the question, new electronic technology is the answer, let me say that universities in general and scholarly publication in particular have nothing to be proud of when it comes to timely adoption and appropriate exploitation of “new” media.

We missed the broadcast era almost entirely. There have been few interesting educational forays into broadcast media from Universities worldwide. Our collective response was either to set up TV as a contagion (as in “TV rots your brain”) to which we were the antidote, or to use a “business as usual” model of pedagogy which made for some painfully poor television. Broadcasters themselves (without the aid of universities) have made the running on the use of TV for universal education – from the BBC Natural History Unit to Discovery Channel (David Attenborough to Steve Irwin) – it has largely been achieved without us.

So while it is clearly right to say that electronic publication is the answer to the crisis of over-provision, market distortion, conflict of interest and the flight of intellectual property and profit from the public to the private sector, it would also be wise to express caution about whether universities, academics and scholarly presses are up to the challenge.

Much progress has been made in thinking through the contribution electronic scholarly publishing can make; the presentation from Roy Tennant to this symposium (see <http://escholarship.cdlib.org/>) being a good example. Again, there's no need to invent new solutions here, simply a need to sign up to the changes and developments being proposed by those who lead the field.

Questions of how to ensure quality, peer review, and certification of value can be addressed, as can the issue of how to get those who benefit from publication, including universities and individual academics, to underwrite its cost.

Meanwhile, electronic publication:

- Promises improvements in timeliness of scholarly dissemination,
- Allows certain sorts of scholarly output to continue to circulate freely as a public good,
- Contributes as yet unrealised (and unknown) potential to the repertoire of scholarly media forms.

Electronic publication needs a combination of: an education program to get academics to understand and “own” the problems; a business plan; and “a tough, no-nonsense discussion of the issue of electronic property rights” (*Policy Perspectives*, p. 10 of 16) – based on the way that universities share with academics and external companies the costs and proceeds of patents rather than copyright.

5. Readership

Having a care for readers means shifting from a “provision” to a “service” model of scholarly publication. Allowing readers to exert some direct influence on demand will improve the quality and reduce the quantity of scholarly publication.

In summary, we should be worrying about something else:

- It's not the “death of the *book*” – it's the death of the **library**.
- Not the death of the book; the death of the **journal**.
- Not the death of the book: the death of the **reader!**

References and Further Reading:

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