

A Brief History of Scholarly Publishing

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HOWEVER much Karl Marx was wrong in projecting the future direction of society and predicting the demise of capitalism, he did understand very well how important changes in technology, which he called the “forces of production,” were to shaping everything else in our lives, or “the relations of production.” And nowhere does this insight apply better than to the modern history of publishing in general and to scholarly publishing in particular.

In the summer of 1967, after spending two years studying philosophy in graduate school (first at Columbia and then back at Princeton again), I applied and was accepted for a job as copyeditor at Princeton University Press (PUP). My starting salary was \$6,000 (\$2,000 less than our classmate Star Lawrence was paid when he started out two years later at W.W. Norton). I spent that whole summer in the former school building on Nassau Street that would later house the Creative Arts Program at the university, literally feeling I was in a sweatshop because the building had no air conditioning. The reason for these temporary quarters was that the Press was remodeling the Scribner Building at 41 William Street after having moved all of its printing equipment to a new location in Lawrenceville just off of Route 95.

Such was the state of technology for publishing at the time when books were still being keyboarded by human compositors using linotype machines, which had been the standard method since the late 19th century. The production process also employed proofreaders who would sit next to each other while one read from the manuscript copy and the other marked any errors uncovered in the long green sheets known as galley proofs. Once final corrections were made by the compositor, the assembled lines of type were passed on to the operators of the large flatbed printing presses that took up most of the floor space. These machines turned out large sheets of paper with multiple pages that were then folded as signatures and finally cut into the sequence of individual pages that were bound into the book, either by using glue to attach the pages to each other at the spine and affix a paperback cover (which was done at the plant itself) or by having the pages sewn together and then bound into a book (by a specialty binder at another location).

Princeton was unusual among university presses in owning and operating its own production facility and was the last press in the United States to do so, selling it off in 1993. (The University of Toronto Press continues to incorporate a printing plant, as well as a bookstore, in its operations.) For a brief history of PUP, see http://press.princeton.edu/about_pup/pup_hist.html.

The pre-production process also used methods that had been standard in the industry for centuries. In the 1960s, manuscripts were sent to the Press by regular mail, logged in manually by secretaries (who

were still called such in those days, rather than “administrative assistants”), and passed on to editors for review. Some were immediately rejected and others were subjected to further evaluation by experts in the field, whom the editors approached by phone or by letter. Those that survived this rigorous process of peer review were presented by their sponsoring editors to the Press’s editorial board, which consisted of a small number of Princeton faculty members representing the broad areas in which PUP published: humanities, social sciences, mathematics, and natural sciences.

Unlike almost all other American university presses, PUP had been established in 1905 as a separate corporation, not as a unit of the university, and thus enjoyed an unusual degree of independence in its operations. The university did control the Press’s use of its imprint and the university president sat as an ex officio member of PUP’s board of trustees (which for most of the Press’s history was chaired by a Princeton alumnus, with the 25-year service of Harold McGraw Jr. ’40 being the longest term). Copyediting, too, was done in the traditional manner of marking up the final manuscript with a blue pencil, with the designer later adding more marks to instruct the compositor about formatting. The most advanced technology used in this stage of the publishing process was the mimeograph machine, which helped make multiple sets of staff and reader reports for the editorial board, for example.

Young people in publishing today would not recognize how the business worked back then. It would seem to them as ancient as an old 78-rpm record. Before I left PUP in 1989, changes in technology had already begun to revolutionize the industry, but it was in the internal operating environment that the first impact was felt, rather than in the final product. The age of the ebook was still more than a decade away, the Internet itself had not yet become a disruptive force, and Jeff Bezos ’86 had yet to imagine the company he would name Amazon.com.

WHAT were these changes, and how did they affect the way publishing companies operated? The advent of the photocopier was one of the earliest and most life-changing innovations. Using regular typewriter paper, it made everyone’s life easier, allowing the marketing department, for instance, to distribute multiple copies of promotional materials both internally to staff and externally to sales people, customers, and media. The photocopy machine became a staple of the Press’s everyday business by the early 1970s. Another device introduced not long thereafter was the Dictaphone. Instead of typing out one’s own correspondence, or literally dictating it to a secretary who would transcribe it in shorthand (now a lost art), an editor could read aloud into the microphone of this device, which produced a recording that a secretary could listen to and type as a letter.

But the Dictaphone died as soon as computers began sprouting up on desks around the office. Ironically, most people went back to producing their own letters by keyboarding them into their computers, but of course computers had many other uses besides serving as fancy typewriters (and it took quite a while for typewriters themselves to disappear entirely from desks). The first computer widely used at PUP was the TRS-80 Model III (Tandy/Radio Shack Z-80), acquired beginning in 1982.

By that time I had advanced from my original job as a copyeditor to being social science editor and assistant director, and I did not find many uses for the computer at that point in my career. But the introduction of desktop computers did begin to have a revolutionary impact on the whole production process, starting with copyediting and then progressing through design and typesetting. Our classmate Chuck Creesy, who moved over to the book-publishing side of PUP in 1987 after serving twelve years as editor of the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, where he pioneered the use computers for magazine publishing, describes what happened on the facing page.

Chuck also headed a project sponsored by the Association of American University Presses to create an early online catalog/bookstore, actually a precursor to Amazon.com but ultimately a victim of the latter’s rise to dominance. Though a technological innovation in itself, the AAUP Online Catalogue was not oriented toward selling books in electronic form. Its purpose was merely to serve as a convenient one-stop

shopping source for scholarly books in print form, just as Amazon.com itself started as a kind of gigantic electronic warehouse where titles of all kinds could be discovered and then ordered and shipped in the way print books had been for decades.

This is not to say that people in the industry weren't already talking about the possibility of publishing books electronically and selling them as what we would later come to call ebooks. The beginnings of such discussion within scholarly publishing can be credited in part to the vision of PUP's director, Herbert Bailey '42, who along with other members of his staff had begun struggling with how we could all cope with what came to be known as the crisis in scholarly communication. By the late 1960s it had become evident that academic libraries were shifting their acquisitions budgets more toward journal subscriptions, because of the rapid growth in the number and price of journals especially in science, technology, and medicine (the STM sector, as it came to be called), leaving less money to spend on books.

The ratio of expenditures, which for many years had been 1:1, rose to 2:1 and eventually 3:1 in favor of journals over books. What had been a typical sale of 3,000 copies for a monograph in the 1960s fell to half that number by the 1980s, and continued to decrease, going under 1,000 by the 1990s and all the way down to around 300 for an average sale today. Some fields experienced this decline more drastically than others, and scholars in those disciplines—such as African studies, literary criticism, and music—began to worry about whether they would be able to find publishers willing to accept their manuscripts. The clarion call of “publish or perish” came to be a watchword of the times. Research universities continued to insist on publication of at least one book, in most of the humanities and social sciences (though some subfields em-

phasized publication of journal articles more than books), as a sine qua non for a scholar to achieve tenure, and some universities even upped the ante to two books.

At the same time that library sales were spiraling downward, commercial publishing was undergoing its own transformation. Longtime independent publishers like Scribner's and Sons (whose scion, Charles Scribner of the Class of 1875, had donated the funds for the building on William Street that PUP came to call home) were absorbed into giant conglomerates and became mere imprints rather than stand-alone publishers. (W.W. Norton, where Star Lawrence works, is a rare example of a commercial publishing house that somehow has managed to maintain its independence.) It is common now to refer to the Big Five conglomerates that dominate commercial trade publishing today: Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin/Random House, and Simon & Schuster. A

From Hot Lead to Bits and Bytes

The revolution in printing technology that overtook book publishing in the 1980s owed its beginnings to the widespread adoption of word-processing programs by its authors. As enticing as the prospect of “capturing initial keystrokes” seemed, however, many difficulties had to be overcome. Authors were using dozens of different kinds of word processors on almost as many different kinds of computers, so translating their files into usable form could be tricky. There was also the problem of preserving the formatting—particularly such things as italics, superscripts, and accents—and the need for consistency. It took time and effort to acquire the new skill sets and tools required to manage the transition.

The next step was to train copyeditors to retire their blue pencils and edit on screen, using software that preserved the before-and-after trail so authors could follow and approve (or argue about) the changes. At the same time, typesetting codes had to be introduced to control the appearance of the output. Initially, the coded files were fed to composition systems (running on minicomputers) that drove the phototypesetters. Later, so-called desktop publishing programs (running on PCs) joined the mix.

In time, marketing departments followed suit, learning how to produce catalogs and advertisements on computer, and developing specialized databases to facilitate the process. Both book and ad designers traded their T-squares for Macintoshes and also took advantage of graphics software to manipulate images and touch up photographs. Then came the Internet and the World Wide Web, which led to online book sales, a CD boom and bust, and the rise of ebooks.—C.C.

similar trend concentrated college textbook publishing in just four companies: Cengage, McGraw-Hill, Pearson, and Wiley.

One consequence of this industry consolidation affected scholarly publishers directly. As the pressure for trade houses to increase their profit margins grew more intense, they cut back on the publication of what had been considered “mid-list” books—titles that had sales in the range of 10,000 to 50,000 copies—in order to focus more attention on the best-selling “blockbusters,” for which authors were receiving ever higher advances, into seven figures. University presses, faced with declining sales of monographs, succumbed to the temptation to go after these mid-list books, adding them to their growing lists in the 1980s without significantly reducing the number of monographs they published. But in the 1990s these mid-list titles began to displace monographs. The term that Bailey had already adopted to describe monographs in fields where sales were so low as to discourage editors from wanting to publish them—“endangered species”—came a common focus of concern for university presses, whose mission was to disseminate knowledge in all branches of scholarly inquiry but whose economic fragility increasingly challenged them to figure out how to continue publishing such books.

THUS began the long quest for an alternative business model for scholarly publishing, which today is called “open access,” a term now most commonly associated with a movement in journal publishing that advocated changing the approach from financing the costs of producing journals through the sale of subscriptions to both individuals and libraries to financing them through a variety of sources, including funds from foundations, direct charges to authors, and subsidies from universities, so that users would not have to pay anything to access them online. The term gained popularity when a declaration was made in 2002 that is now called the Budapest Open Access Initiative. For many years the focus of this movement concentrated almost entirely on journals, and more those in the STM fields than in the humanities or social sciences.

But, starting with talks Herbert Bailey and I had with top leaders at the Mellon Foundation (later headed by William Bowen after his presidency at Princeton came to an end) in the 1970s and early 1980s, some of us began to discuss applying a similar approach to dealing with the crisis in monograph publishing. Our focus at PUP was on the field of Latin American studies, which I had spent much effort building into one of PUP’s premier lists, and I carried this focus with me when I left PUP in 1989 to become director of Penn State University Press. There I engaged in discussions with a few librarians who were connected with the Press through our editorial board, and eventually we formulated a proposal to launch an experiment in electronic monograph publishing in that field.

It was around this time, in 1990, that Penn State became a member of the Big Ten Conference and its associated academic consortium, known as the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), which also includes the University of Chicago. The CIC had a long tradition of hosting meetings to bring together people from different areas of university life to talk about common interests. Now the CIC press directors began to meet regularly and in short order decided that it would be a good idea to meet jointly with the CIC library heads to discuss issues in scholarly communication that affected both operations. Our proposal for Latin American studies eventually expanded into a more ambitious experiment that would seek to develop an “open access” model for publishing in two fields—a long-established field, comparative literature, and a much newer field, African American studies—both of which had been struggling with the economics of publishing.

Although the formal proposal made by our group of CIC library and press directors was ultimately not funded by the Mellon Foundation, the idea did not die. Independently, the National Academies Press (NAP), which is also a member of the AAUP, began posting all of its new books on its website and making them available as “open access” publications. Some other presses began similar experiments, and at Penn State we officially launched our Office of Digital Scholarly Publishing in the spring of 2005, including a

book series in Romance Studies that we made “open access.” Our approach was somewhat different from NAP’s technologically, but the business model was basically the same. Some income to support the series came from selling “print-on-demand” (POD) copies of the books, just as NAP had done. This joint venture of the Press and the Libraries at Penn State soon led to the administrative merger of the two units.

I became an advocate of the “open access” approach to scholarly publishing, and during my presidency of the AAUP in 2007-8 I drafted its official Statement on Open Access and published an article expanding on its aim and rationale. More recently, I had the privilege of serving on the search committee to hire the first director of the new Amherst College Press, which is committed to publishing all of its books in the humanities in “open access” mode.

This, I truly believe, is the future of scholarly publishing, both journals and books, at least for university presses. How far commercial publishers will go in adopting this model is open to question, although some have already taken the plunge, including Bloomsbury Academic and Palgrave Macmillan in the UK. But it will take some time for American university presses to go “open access” in more than a marginal way, even though a number of presses are operating in this fashion already in Australia, Canada, and Europe, as well as the UK. The Amherst Press was the first to do so in the U.S. in fields other than the sciences (where NAP is obviously concentrated, as its name indicates). But recently some encouraging signs have arisen with the Association of American Universities joining with the Association of Research Libraries in providing funding for the publication of first books by scholars in the humanities in “open access” mode, and a similar project under way at the Mellon Foundation, both announced in June 2014: <http://chronicle.com/blogs/wiredcampus/who-ought-to-underwrite-publishing-scholars-books/53621>. Even more recently, in January 2015, the University of California Press posted a notice about a new open-access book initiative called Luminos: <http://www.luminosoa.org/>. But serious challenges remain.

Why is this so?

ON THE face of it, the logic for moving toward “open access” is compelling. A professor may spend an entire decade doing research for and writing a book of original scholarship, only to see it published in a few hundred copies that end up in the stacks of libraries, mostly in the U.S., available only to people affiliated with universities whose libraries still have enough money to buy a significant number of monographs. Publishing these same books “open access” makes them available to anyone in the world with an Internet connection, at no cost for reading online (including for classroom assignments), and some allow for downloading and printing of chapters as well. The stimulus to scholarly communication worldwide is multiplied hugely in this way, making this scholarship accessible to people in countries that cannot afford to have well-stocked libraries. Authors benefit from having the potential to reach a great many more readers—and from the opportunity to have their work cited many more times (which in academe is known, in STM journal publishing particularly, as the “impact factor,” and which figures importantly into every author’s career advancement).

While university administrators in the U.S. have been keen to support “open access” in STM journal publishing, they have not yet evinced much vocal support for using this approach in scholarly book publishing. Evidently, for budgetary reasons, they want their presses to continue operating on the market model, recovering (on average) 90 percent of their operating costs from sales. Only a few forward-looking administrators, as at Amherst, have been willing to take the plunge. The Amherst approach is perhaps the most sound, resting as it does on an endowment that will pay the salaries of the press’s employees. Meanwhile, other presses have placed their faith in the new aggregations of ebooks that are sold via subscription to libraries by vendors like JSTOR, Oxford Online, and the University Press Content Consortium (run as part of Johns Hopkins University’s Project Muse). So long as these seem to be economically successful, the day of reckoning may be postponed for some time into the future. But I am convinced that “open access” at some point will become too powerfully tempting to resist.

Technology has helped postpone this day of reckoning in a number of ways. First, by making the process of publishing much more efficient, it has helped reduce operating costs even as inflation has taken its usual toll. Second, the advent of digital printing, combined with the optimization of discovery through Google and other search engines, has both made true POD feasible (thereby reducing inventory costs and enhancing cash flow) and created the “long tail” of sales of backlist titles, thus contributing to increased sales revenues. Both of these technologically driven improvements in the publishing business have helped presses keep their heads above water even as sales of monographs to libraries have steadily declined. And presses have also managed to ward off economic disaster by diversifying their publishing programs, not only adding the “mid-list” trade titles but also, for some presses, regional titles (including popular regional cookbooks and bird guides), fiction, reference works, and even some high-level textbooks.

ONE technological innovation, however, has not affected scholarly publishing even while it has vastly transformed trade publishing. The rise of ebooks, especially as promoted and dominated by Amazon, has taken self-publishing from the backwaters of “vanity” publishing to a level that now threatens to compete with, or at least complicate, the business of the major commercial trade publishers—as we saw in the recent fierce debate between Hachette and Amazon, with the bulk of Amazon’s supporters being those self-published authors who have benefited, financially and otherwise, from the exposure that Amazon has provided for their self-produced works of fiction and nonfiction. The services that publishing houses have traditionally provided (copyediting, design, marketing, etc.) can now be bought on the open market from independent contractors.

Meanwhile, the one major advantage that traditional publishers could guarantee authors—the ability to get their books stocked and featured in general retail bookstores—has been undermined by the disappearance of many independent bookstores and the failure of some of the large chains like Borders. Thus authors who have the option of self-publishing and getting a 70 percent return through Amazon are asking themselves what traditional publishers can offer them that is worth accepting only 15 percent in royalties instead. That’s a good question for them to be asking, and even literary agents have begun to adjust to the new environment by coordinating the provision of services to self-published authors and charging a fee for doing so, thereby displacing publishers even more.

Why has this development not affected scholarly publishing? The simple reason is that peer review is essential to the entire academic enterprise in such a way that it cannot be eliminated without changing the whole structure of academic career advancement. Scholars need to have their books published by presses that can offer rigorous peer review and that have built reputations for publishing important books in their chosen fields over many decades, which provide the “prestige” through their imprints that scholars depend upon to win tenure and gain promotion from associate to full professor. There are efforts to experiment with “crowd” pre-publication review and post-publication open review as alternatives to standard pre-publication peer review by experts selected by the publishers, but so far they have remained on the margins and there is no prospect of their displacing traditional peer review anytime soon, if ever. So, in the academic space self-publishing remains no threat to scholarly publishers even as it is proving to be a very disruptive force in commercial trade publishing.