

Against the Grain

Volume 28 | Issue 3

Article 12

2016

Why Monographs Matter

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Recommended Citation

Crossick, Geoffrey (2018) "Why Monographs Matter," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 28: Iss. 3, Article 12.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7358>

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Monographs as Essays ... from page 22

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

1. *Promoting the Uptake of E-books in Higher and Further Education*. Rep. London: JISC, 2003. <http://observatory.jisc-ebooks.org/files/2011/01/Promoting-the-uptake-of-ebooks.pdf>; *Survey of Ebook Penetration and Use in U.S. Academic Libraries*. Rep. Chicago: Library Journal, 2010. Print.
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Why Monographs Matter

by **Geoffrey Crossick** (School of Advanced Study, University of London) <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.¹ 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,² 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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scholarly editions of texts, and monographs. It is the monograph that resonates most with humanities scholars, and to a lesser but still significant extent those in the arts and social sciences, and it is on the monograph that this piece will concentrate.

The book has a special place not just in the dissemination of research in these disciplines but in their culture, and that is why researchers not only identify with their own books but also remain committed to reading those written by others in their field and beyond. A 2014 survey by OAPEN-UK of over 2000 academics in the arts, humanities and social sciences confirmed this: 66 percent of humanities researchers who responded had published at least one monograph and 48 percent of those in the social sciences. When asked how important it was in their discipline to publish monographs, 95 percent of those in the humanities said that it was important or very important to do so while the figure for reading monographs was 98 percent. By far the main motivation for reading the last monograph they had used was research and writing, and for that last monograph 40 percent of humanities academics had read the whole book, with the rest having mostly read at least a few chapters. Very few had read only a single chapter.³

The evidence of this survey confirms the more informal sense that the monograph remains fundamental to scholarly communication in the UK. The key question, of course, is why that should be the case when the journal article has come to be supreme in other parts of the research landscape. It is not a matter of researchers in the humanities not publishing journal articles because almost all do so, but as one part of a wider portfolio rather than the overwhelming dominance that we find in the medical, physical and life sciences. There are various reasons why the book-length report on research has come to play such a pivotal role across virtually all humanities disciplines and some in the social sciences (politics, sociology and anthropology in particular though to a lesser extent than the lead humanities disciplines of English, history and classics). As I argued in my report, the most effective way of communicating several years of sustained research on a single topic is to present it as a monograph. It provides the length and space needed to allow a full examination of a topic, with the objective of presenting complex and rich ideas and arguments supported by carefully contextualised analysis and evidence. The research data are of a character which cannot be replicated or modelled, and this means that there is a need to present “thick description” and more direct evidence. Journal articles do not provide the same opportunity to weave together the elements of a complex and reflective narrative. The observation made to me by a lecturer in comparative literature sums it up well and equivalent though not identical formulations could be made elsewhere in the humanities: “where the journal article allows a scholar to make suggestions, provocations,

and establish starting points for research, a monograph enables the scholar to go much further in terms of embedding their research in a larger scholarly, temporal and spatial network.”⁴ This is, of course, but one sense of the journal article, which in other disciplines such as history, classics or social sciences may represent a contained and focused presentation of a specific topic. Both are different from the monograph.

The term “thinking through the book” emerged through the consultations, a concept that effectively reintegrates the research into the writing process itself. Discussion of different forms of scholarly communication may imply that the purpose of each is an equivalent process of imparting conclusions with the difference between them a matter of effectiveness. Yet the difference between a journal article, a monograph and an exhibition, each the product of sustained research, can be more fundamental. The act of constructing and writing a book is often a core way to shape the ideas, structure the argument and work out the relationship between these and the evidence. An earlier study cites an English literature academic who said that “the medium in which we, ourselves, construct our arguments is book-based.”⁵ Journal articles are of varying lengths and objectives and it would be wrong to insist that this process is absent from their writing, but it is nonetheless the case that authors generally see the article as a way of presenting to an audience arguments and evidence that they have already shaped, whereas the literary and intellectual form of the monograph makes its writing a much more dynamic part of the research process. The character of internal debate in a field, which means that theoretical and methodological approaches have to be set out and interrogated, may be a further reason why the book is the appropriate means of working out and communicating an author’s underlying approach. Here too “thinking through the book” captures the process well.

Is this one reason why academics in the humanities feel such a strong sense of identity with the books they write? Part of this may be the time, effort and often emotional energy that goes into researching and writing a monograph, but it is more than this because an academic author can also develop and articulate through writing a book what might be seen as their personal and distinctive voice. It has been argued that non-English speaking authors in the humanities are much more likely than their science colleagues to publish in their native language because their “thinking may be deeply intertwined with their language expressions.”⁶ This is not, then, simply about communication. The book may come to serve as the physical expression of a long period of thinking, understanding and research. It is, in a very real sense, part of the author’s identity.

Lest what I have argued suggests only high-minded reasons for books to be so important, we must ground them in the reality of the academic career. The monograph has long been seen in most of the humanities as a signal of an academic’s qualities as a researcher, and that has woven itself into university appointment and promotion procedures. The consul-

tations undertaken for my report revealed a pattern much more flexible than in the United States. There is in the UK simply no *de jure* or *de facto* expectation of one or two monographs for appointment, tenure or promotion. There was great variation between disciplines, within disciplines and across institutions. The monograph was important in most disciplines but, even where it reigned strongly as in history and English, it was not obligatory. The apparent monograph requirement in the U.S. may be one of the forces behind a sense of the crisis of the monograph because it is so bound up with credentialism.

I interrogate the question of a crisis of the monograph from the UK perspective in the report, and interested readers are referred to the discussion there.⁷ There is no crisis in terms of numbers published which have doubled between 2004 and 2013 for the four biggest monograph publishers, with significant growth across all disciplines apart from modern languages. A major growth in student numbers has led to more academics and more research, which may have increased the long-existing problem of its being more difficult to publish in some sub-areas than others. The decline in print runs means little with print-on-demand publishing systems. There has been a decline in library purchasing as budgets have been squeezed by the cost of science journals and other pressures, and there is anecdotal evidence of a decline in individual personal purchases, but it should also be noted that 72 percent of humanities academics in the OAPEN-UK survey reported that it was either easy or very easy to access the books they needed to read. Things are by no means rosy, but the report concludes that it was hard to describe the problems in the UK as having become more acute in recent years and thus constituting a crisis. If there is an argument for open access for monographs, and my report concluded that there is, then it should be seen in far more positive terms than as a response to a perceived crisis. The positive reasons for encouraging open access range from, on the one hand, allowing the maximum possible access to the findings of research, both at home and internationally including in academic environments where the resources for research are very limited; to, on the other hand, the potential for digital open access books to become more dynamic than their print versions, enriched with online data, evidence and above all debate within the scholarly community.

There may be a crisis looming, however, which will put far more pressure on the monograph as I have presented it here, an extended work of 250 or more pages that exists as an argued and integrated whole that is fundamental to how humanities and many social science disciplines shape and share new knowledge. It is increasingly possible to purchase individual chapters online, and many people do so. It is the same process that was seen with online purchase of individual tracks in music which resulted in damaging consequences for the integrated album. If more and more books are available digitally and behind paywalls the trend to purchasing individual chapters will

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surely grow where that is possible and with it we shall see the decline of the monograph as it has been presented here. The case for open access seems to me a strong one, though the practical difficulties of achieving it without damaging the monograph as it is valued today are significant and are explored at length in the report, as are the challenges involved in ensuring that academics have confidence in the way open access is introduced. Nonetheless, the looming crisis of the monograph when everyone can purchase individual chapters, a crisis of fragmentation which could destroy what the monograph is and what it means, might only be avoided by having the full book freely accessible online. 🐼

Endnotes

1. **Geoffrey Crossick**, *Monographs and Open Access* (Bristol: HEFCE, 2015) <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2015/monographs/>
2. *The Metric Tide: Report of the Independent Review of the Role of Metrics in Research Assessment and Management* (Bristol: HEFCE, 2015), Supplementary Report II, pp. 4-5. <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2015/metrictide/Title,104463.en.html>. Only computer science was an outlier with 72 percent of submissions journal articles.
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6. **Mu-hsuan Huang and Yu-wei Chang**, "Characteristics of Research Output in Social Sciences and Humanities: From a Research Evaluation Perspective," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 59(11) p. 1824.
7. **Crossick**, pp. 21-26.

Monographs in a Changing Reading Culture

by **Adriaan van der Weel** (Book and Digital Media Studies, Leiden University)
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There is a need universally acknowledged for the SSH monograph to migrate to the digital realm where we all now reside so much of the time. The monograph continues strongly as academic currency, both economically — to buy prestige and a career — and intellectually. No one doubts the importance of the monograph, and neither do I. Nor do I doubt the need to adapt it to the research practices of modern scholarship, which are indeed increasingly digital. So clearly for the sake of digital discoverability — to remain visible — and for convenience of access the monograph should digitize.

Yet taking a longer view, both as a book historian and as a reading researcher, I have some niggling doubts whether giving it a digital guise will be enough to secure the monograph's intellectual future. It may make excellent technological and economic sense, and it may answer better to readers' information hunting strategies than paper does, but is this enough? Couldn't the monograph as an intellectual genre be just as historically contingent as are text technologies and reading cultures? What if the monograph were the product of a particular reading culture that, however dominant it may have been, is now rapidly being overtaken by a radically different one? Worse, what if moving it to the digital realm actually hampered rather than aided the monograph's chances to make a successful contribution to scholarly communication?

As we all know, to do justice to the long-form argument *as the author intended it*, the monograph ought ideally to be read from cover to cover. And as we also know, this is best done on paper. No screen is a match for paper when it comes to concentration on the text. According to **Naomi Barron** (author of *Words Onscreen*, a monograph entirely devoted to the issue of how technology is affecting reading habits), 92 per cent of 400 young adults [!] in the U.S., Japan, Germany, Slovakia, and India said they could concentrate better on paper than on any screens (<http://blog.oup.com>, 24 Febru-

ary 2016). This matches the fact that despite a large and growing number of readers who have invested in e-reading devices, long-form texts are still preponderantly read in paper forms. In the U.S. eBooks represent about 25-30 per cent of trade book sales, but in Europe no more than about 5 per cent on average, with the UK hovering somewhere in between.

Some years ago the problem with screens was thought to be mainly a matter of quality, with flicker and low resolution being the two chief hindrances. Improvements of screen technology (e-ink, flicker-free CRT and high-definition LED screens) have largely removed this factor, so the tenacity of our paper-based reading habits must have a different cause. As it turns out, today's multidisciplinary reading research is actually able to suggest some good explanations, especially when it comes to more demanding reading such as monographs. First of all there are some basic *ergonomic* differences. Unlike the utter predictability of the printed book as a reading machine, screen technology is always subject to change. Even the presence of such essential ingredients for the successful use of the monograph as an intellectual tool as bookmarking, underlining and annotation cannot be taken for granted in digital reading software. It is up to the reader to become familiar with the functionality of each particular combination of reading software and screen hardware encountered.

More particularly relevant for long-form texts like monographs, in an *attentional-perceptual* sense paper is more conducive to concentration than screens with their inbuilt distraction. Rather than deliver ourselves into the hands of the author in the classic "one author, one text, one book" paradigm, as digital readers we are faced with an infinite "docuverse" of linked texts. Helpful as links may be for some purposes, such as discovery, they are also invitations to go in search of greener reading pastures, necessitating constant decisions to constitute the reading text. The reading

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Speaking of this issue, don't miss the **Special Report on Consolidation in the Industry**. This was conceived over dinner by **David Parker** who is the driving force behind this initiative. There are statements from ten luminaries so far. And we hope to get more. Are you interested in adding your perspective? If so, please write **David** <darker@astreetpress.com>, or **Tom Gilson** <GilsonT@

cofc.edu>, or me <kstrauch@comcast.net>! Looking forward!

See **Erin Gallagher's Hot Topics** this week. **Erin** was in Orlando this past Sunday where at least 50 people were killed and many wounded. She facebooked that she was safe. Thank goodness. We love you, **Erin**. Stay safe!
www.against-the-grain.com/

Just heard a minute ago that **Microsoft Corp** (MSFT.O) will buy **LinkedIn Corp** (LNKD.N) for \$26.2 billion in its biggest-ever

deal, marking CEO **Satya Nadella's** first big effort to breathe new life into the software giant's business-productivity tools. I don't do much with social media but I find that **LinkedIn** is a great resource.
<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-linkedin-m-a-microsoft-idUSKCN0YZ1FP>

I was excited to learn that the **ACI Scholarly Blog Index** has won the **SIIA Business Technology 2016 CODIE Award for Best Scholarly Research Information Solution**.

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