

OPINION PIECE

(wileyonlinelibrary.com) doi: 10.1002/leap.1319

What significance does Publishing Studies have right now?

Alison Baverstock 

A. Baverstock

Department of Journalism, Publishing and Media,
Kingston University, London, UK

ORCID: 0000-0003-0385-8937

E-mail: a.baverstock@kingston.ac.uk

Key points

- Publishing Studies are surely the epitome of how an open-minded discipline can operate collaboratively, blending different methodologies and practices.
- Publishing Studies offer what governments say they want from their universities: industry-relevant research that provides market-ready, employable students with strong industry links.
- Publishing Studies are naturally interdisciplinary, providing a broader approach to education than the traditionally narrow focus of academic studies.
- The international outlook of publishing makes it a useful model for how to manage cross-disciplinary and cross-faculty collaboration.

A couple of years ago, I spent a week at the Institut für Buchwissenschaft at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg in Germany as the guest of Professor Svenja Hagenhoff. I was asked to go and present my research on both self-publishing and pre-arrival shared reading to her undergraduate and masters students, and she and I then talked about possibilities for research collaboration. Erlangen is an exquisite medieval town in Southern Germany 20k from Nurnberg, a city subject to significant damage during the Second World War and since rebuilt. The University of Erlangen-Nurnberg is split between the two locations, with Erlangen both home to 40,000 students and headquarters of global engineering and technology sciences company Siemens, with whom relationships are strong.

The publishing courses are sited in Erlangen, but this split-site university and the local blending of industry and academia provide an appropriate context for pondering the nature of Publishing Studies as an academic discipline. While any such consideration needs to start by acknowledging the ground-breaking work of Simone Murray (Murray, 2007), I found the objectivity induced by being away from home made wider consideration of our discipline feel timely.

Much more recently, the sudden and pandemic-induced need to think really quickly about how university courses can be delivered in a variety of possible scenarios, depending on a variety of circumstances we can still not predict, has required rapid planning. All this is taking place against a background of both local political interests and wider international trends as we prepare for the start of the academic year 2020–2021.

Buchwissenschaft – which is what is offered at Erlangen – is a typically German portmanteau word covering books, knowledge, and science, potentially translated as ‘Publishing Studies’ or ‘Book Science’.

‘Publishing Studies’ (PS) is a relatively new discipline but draws on the much older fields of Book History and Librarianship. ‘Book Science’ sounds more modern but potentially risks being stranded in time as, today, much publishing is not what is conventionally thought of as a book. Erlangen outlines the book as a ‘medium of text based communication’, which can encompass a range of formats from the scroll to the blog. Professor Hagenhoff told me she would be tempted by the more general title of ‘Publishing Studies’, but colleagues managing their marketing fear confusion if they advertise an English title for a course that is taught in German. One of her Nuremberg colleagues, Professor Axel Kuhn, was exploring the term ‘Kulturpublizistik’ for the discipline, translated as ‘cultural publishing’, which ‘integrates the historical and actual phenomena of text-based media as well as economic and cultural aspects of text-based communication, this within a growing consciousness in Germany around building Book Studies as an independent academic discipline’. He comments further: ‘In recent years there have been made strong efforts to establish Publishing Studies as part of the academic media and communication studies by an open discourse about its own original problem solving capacity for text-based media and communication, thus more of an academic than industry-based research.’

Given the rich tradition of Book History that underpins PS, it would arguably be a shame to fail to acknowledge its book-

related origins. It is worth noting that, in business, organizations regularly develop far from their original operational concept (e.g. the magazine *Good Housekeeping*, which extends beyond home management, and Carphone Warehouse, which has long offered more than in-car comms). The skillset learned on such courses, which includes (amongst many other areas) understanding supply chains, business modelling, sustainability, and project management, is transferrable to many other roles and sectors, in addition to being really useful in non-traditional publishing situations such as the production of corporate brochures and the offering of publishing services to the growing market for self-publishing. Perhaps the disciplinary name will matter less as international understanding grows – and an acronym can be agreed upon. Whatever is decided, all this wrestling with nomenclature and disciplinary nature have arguably promoted both objectivity and sensitivity about how it may develop in future.

PS' more recent growth within higher education has largely built on a particular blend: the exploration of professional practice at the highest level with academic thinking. As Erlangen's promotional brochure states, study 'leads to competencies in two areas: the acquisition of scholarly and analytical skills as well as fundamental applied knowledge of the book industry'. Professor Svenja Hagenhoff explains: 'In our Master's program, 20 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) points are included (out of a programme total of 120). The students get a complex "real world problem" they have to work on for a year. Typically, they have to present their different interim stages to different stakeholders, like practitioners or professional librarians, who provide the topic or problem.'

This has a number of significant benefits. A dual-stranded education leaves students well placed to function in their industry of choice but also equipped with academic thinking and problem-solving skills and so able to approach logically, and hopefully manage effectively, problems currently unanticipated. Like now.

A DISCIPLINE IN A GOVERNMENT – PLEASING PACKAGE

In essence, PS has long offered what governments internationally say they want from their universities: industry-relevant research; market-ready, employable students; strong industry links. Colleagues do not find it difficult to outline the benefits to society of their research (handy when filling out grant application forms) and can be a useful source of impact case studies or industry liaison when universities seek examples, as they are increasingly required to do.

We are also instinctively interdisciplinary, drawing on a variety of methodologies: Librarianship and Information Management; Perception and Psychology; Marketing and Business Studies; Literature and Critical Theory; and Production, Technology and Digital Development. Within academia, we have been chameleons. Departments/courses tend to be sited, and find appropriate institutional fit, wherever colleagues had the idea to

launch Publishing. Publishing is routinely offered as a combined field; it does not exist as a separate subject within University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and is presented with Journalism and Public Relations (PR) in the '*Guardian University Guide (annual)* (2020)'. Further research could explore the links between these disciplinary categories and the associated and/or promoted characteristics of student cohorts and staff interests. This would be particularly interesting in the connection with Journalism, which sits well with Publishing as an area of study and shares many transferable skills, without assuming that Publishing as a specific area of study is diluted.

Decisions about which qualification the course should lead to have been similarly pragmatic, for example, in some institutions offering an MSc (rather than an MA) on the grounds that this is perceived as a higher qualification within the market for masters education.

Publishing is also now operating at a variety of levels within the academy. With a few notable exceptions (primarily Oxford Brookes, with their International Centre for the Study of the Book), provision to date has mainly been at masters level on the basis that a broad education first was a sound basis for postgraduate professional development courses geared towards a specific industry. But undergraduate provision too is now growing as students and their funders are attracted by a university discipline that offers the prospect of employment, and in the UK, new courses of undergraduate Publishing have recently been launched at Kingston, Plymouth, and University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN). And although PS will probably never match longer-established disciplines for PhD recruitment, as students generally enrol in order to make themselves employable rather than start an academic career, the field offers growing opportunities for industry-based (and possibly industry-funded) research in collaboration with professional partners. New academic formats, such as PhD by Publication, provide a route for the academic validation of industry-based work, particularly important for acknowledging the contribution of those from an industry background whose professional practice is so important to their teaching.

THE VALUE OF THE PUBLISHER MENTALITY WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION

The mentality of the effective publisher is also useful within the academy, particularly now. Publishers have to be instinctively lateral thinking. A publication seldom finds its home in just one market; they are conditioned to look for a wider spread of interest and additional markets whose potential inclusion can extend sales. Nor is publishing the sequential process many assume: a book may have a jacket design before the manuscript is in house, be marketed long before production specifications are agreed upon. An ability to multitask, think laterally, and – above all – remember how things have worked before, in even roughly similar circumstances, are essential.

Equally relevant is the publisher's international outlook – publishing decisions are routinely made in a global context. A third of UK publishers' sales now come from international deals and rights sales (Lotinga, 2017); this promotes awareness and understanding of other markets, cultures, and diversity (and surely promotes the international recruitment for UK courses of Publishing Education). Former deputy MD of Hachette Children's Books and industry commentator Clare Somerville states: 'Convergence of publishing firms into even larger units (e.g. the emergence of Penguin Random House and the Hachette Group) means that major conglomerates are operating across continents to disseminate content through multiple platforms and media. Smaller publishers need global distribution and partnerships to operate cost effectively. It follows that the publishing mind-set is naturally international and inclusive, and an appreciation of international tastes, trends and individual markets' requirements is inculcated into the publishing mentality. The process also operates reciprocally, as publishers look to other markets for new products/trends.'

The associated experience of managing complex relationships can be particularly useful within the academy, fuelling the 'cross-disciplinary' and 'cross-faculty collaboration', which within some universities are more isolated as important than experienced in practice. Publishers have long engaged with distance learning (e.g. The Publishing Training Centre in the UK) and were involved in inter-professional practice well before it was added to the curriculum – or suddenly made possible by Zoom, which enabled geographically distanced colleagues to be in the same meeting, previously not attempted due to the impossibilities of diary coordination and associated travel.

WHAT OTHER DISCIPLINES CAN LEARN FROM PUBLISHING STUDIES

The operation of PS within higher education has much to teach other, much longer-established, disciplines about how to embrace tolerance within a range of different methodologies. There are social scientists working in Book Studies who undertake empirical research, interviewing, questionnairing, examining companies, exploring the technology used, and making comparisons. Then, there are humanities scholars who interpret stories, often as historians, basing themselves in critical theory, which undertakes minute exploration of each perspective and builds it through specific response to each new layer of meaning. There are practitioners involved in freelance work within the industry, whose practice as research is an ongoing familiarity with industry processes as they develop and whose workplace connectivity is immensely important to the currency of what students are taught. They may never write an academic paper, but their practice, reflectively considered, offers immense value to their academic discipline.

Within universities, it is perhaps rather more common for different research perspectives to be the basis of competition, for

active disengagement from mutual understanding to fuel intolerance. The social scientists see perfection as a multidimensional collaboration between team members that results in a severally authored paper. The Humanities scholar sees perfection as a sole-authored monograph that will remain part of the literature for years to come. Those from a practice background identify first-hand involvement as what matters, without which no teaching should be taking place. But whereas within universities, those with such different traditions tend to be located in different faculties, and may meet only infrequently, within PS, they are routinely found along the same corridor from each other.

The discipline is also international in nature, as is experienced each year at conferences such as SHARP (Society for History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing; www.sharpweb.org) and By the Book (The International Association for Publishing Research). My German is competent but probably not up to explaining the intricacies of my research, so after introducing myself in German at Erlangen, I presented in English. I spoke slowly and hoped they could follow. During questions, I found the entire class spoke English, and their insightful responses demonstrated an international academic collaboration and civility that will hopefully outlast the UK's exit from the EU.

In conclusion, serious media commentators have long highlighted a growing awareness that society's problems today are complex and so unsolvable by any single discipline or methodological approach. As festivals such as Sensorium at Imperial College (2016) or the Cheltenham Science Festival (2020) promote inter-disciplinary speaker panels and new academic developments (e.g. the coming together of scientists and the arts through STEAM, 2020) look to promote sharing and wider academic collaboration, the experience of book scholars was already timely.

Now, with the arrival of a pandemic, academic planning is taking place at a furious pace. New methods of teaching are being suggested; new delivery formats piloted; student expectations managed, while the employment market into which students will emerge is very hard to predict – other than it will be difficult. It follows that new ways of working are needed.

PS academics are very well prepared. Within their profession-orientated field, combining practice and theory while working from various locations, recruiting speakers heard in relevant media, securing live projects from industry to support student understanding, and at the same time developing their contacts and CVs were already a standard part of their HE delivery. Rewriting lecture and seminar content on the basis of incoming industry information has long been their regular (and usually weekly) practice. The need for publishing courses to embrace innovative and professional forms of communication meant that new teaching methods, of the kind now being hastily established within other disciplines, was already recognized. For example, The Publishing Training Centre began offering distance learning for publishing skills back in 1996; first proofreading (Clarke, 1996) and then copy-editing (Horn, 2005) and regular updates (most recently Aherne & Clarke, 2019) have proven particularly popular since the pandemic began. Both were

initially printed resources, with assignments mailed in but later acquired first an online option, before becoming fully online. Barbara Horn commented:

Other organisations, including the Society of Indexers, also offer distance-learning courses. These courses provide the basis for people to begin or further a freelance career, with a potential client base not limited by geography or time zones. The current pandemic has made the ability to work from home more of an imperative than a choice. Having an online option for delivery is particularly valuable given that classroom-based short courses have now been halted by the pandemic, but these already had been losing ground because of the decade of austerity, which caused many publishers to reduce their spending on training.

Distance learning offers a way of delivering training with a reduced overhead and, hence, either a greater profit margin or a reduced participant cost.

Universities meanwhile have experimented with whole modules taught in this way, particularly within Creative Writing/Publishing Masters courses. Never has this entrepreneurial flexibility been more needed. As academics and professional support services are tasked to reformat teaching and assignments to meet a variety of possible teaching scenarios, the PS colleagues' flexibility is looking mighty useful. At Kingston, we are even using the pandemic as a scenario for new thinking about content delivery within publishing, turning the crisis into an opportunity for our students to explore revised communication and delivery models within the economic sector for which we prepare them. And if, as is predicted, there is a fall in student numbers post-COVID-19, with associated budgetary constraints, smart and effective delivery of teaching and associated materials may prove particularly valuable, especially for smaller universities.

At the same time, what was always a transferrable skillset is looking even more valuable. The world has a keen need for publishers' practical information mastery, commercial acumen, and data management skills. Each deadline for negotiations, or public presentation by politicians, requires its accompanying documentation for former allies, oppositions, journalists, and commentators to pore over. The skills of the publishers are thus very much in demand, whether it is to provide the logic behind the politicians' presentations, reference the sources from which the thinking came, or manage the formal delivery of alternative thinking – and consequent legislation.

Meanwhile, and as we seek to restart the economy, low-cost treats of the kind publishers routinely offer have a long trajectory of maintaining morale during times of difficulty (Wright, 2002).

As Jack Baverstock, Special Sales Executive at Hachette, commented: 'The amount of entertainment and joy that you can get from an object that has such a low retail price makes people turn towards books in these times' (personal communication). Right now, books do not involve the forbidden personal intimacy of nail bars or hair salons, and the enforced leisure time available during lockdown has got many back into reading, often as a basis of providing common ground and conversation with those it was impossible to see in person. For example, www.readingforce.org.uk has experienced a nine-fold increase in requests for reading scrapbooks to promote shared reading.

Already operating collaboratively, with an established respect for the blending of different methodologies, practices, and industry penetration, the field of PS is surely the epitome of how an open-minded discipline can operate – and of strong relevance to those entering the workplace, whatever that will look like. As an adaptable discipline that has both found a home and manoeuvred the strictures of delivery within higher education, it is looking very well placed to advise others on how these complexities can work in practice.

REFERENCES

- Aherne, M., & Clarke, G. (2019). *Essential proofreading*. London, England: The Publishing Training Centre. <https://www.publishingtrainingcentre.co.uk/courses/self-study/tutor-guided-courses/essential-copy-editing-editorial-skills-two>.
- Cheltenham Festivals. (2020, 21 April). *Announcing Cheltenham science festival @ home*. Retrieved from <https://www.cheltenhamfestivals.com/news/2020/04/announcing-cheltenham-science-festival-home>
- Clarke, G. (1996). *Basic proofreading by distance learning*. London, England: The Publishing Training Centre.
- Guardian University Guide (annual), 2020. London, England: The Guardian.
- Horn, B. (2005). *Copy-editing by distance learning*. London, England: The Publishing Training Centre.
- Lotinga, S. (2017). Introduction. In *Publishers association yearbook, 2015*. London, England: Publishers Association.
- Murray, S. E. (2007). Publishing studies: Critically mapping research in search of a discipline. *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 22(4), 3–25. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12109-007-0001-4>
- Sensorium at Imperial College. (2016). *Sensorium at Imperial College*. Retrieved from <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/be-inspired/societal-engagement/resources-and-case-studies/engagement-with-research-highlight-stories/sensorium-at-imperial-festival/> Accessed
- STEAM. (2020). *Support for STEAM*. Retrieved from <http://stemtosteam.org>
- Wright, B. W. (2002). *Comic book nation: The transformation of youth culture in America*, *Journal of American History* 89(1), 295–296. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press.