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Professional Learning and Inbetween Publishing: The Tasks of the *Charleston Briefings*

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Abstract

Should the book and the journal article remain the primary forms of scholarly production in the digital age? That is a question asked by publishing scholar Kathleen Fitzpatrick. She proposes a role for “inbetween” work. Indeed, there is a history of “gray literature” in many fields and of the short book. And academic publishers are experimenting with the form. In this context, an explanation of the rationale for and origins of the *Charleston Briefings* illustrates the possibilities for experimenting with inbetween publishing featuring subjects of interest to librarians and professionals in allied fields. There follows an account of the genesis, planning, and composition of a forthcoming *Briefing* on the scholarly workflow. While the length of the *Briefings* may appear to be its defining element, how it manages its scholarly and educational tasks is the key to meeting its goals and the needs of readers. In this case “inbetweenness” can be an advantage for representing the subject’s timeliness and utility while managing the rapidly growing literature on its different dimensions, including what the digital evolution of the scholarly workflow means for library services.

Ours is a fluid, some might say volatile, period for scholarly publishing, as essentials are being rethought to adapt to the digital age. Thus, Northeastern University historian and Dean of Libraries Dan Cohen (2019) recently reported on the dramatic decline in withdrawal of books at academic institutions only weeks before a report appeared stoutly defending the scholarly role of the monograph (CUP & OUP, 2019). Plainly readers and writers do not agree on the durability of familiar forms of publishing.

Finding the Best Form

As Rick Anderson (2018) suggests in his recent survey of scholarly communications, we can learn from attention to our vocabulary for different kinds of texts. Thus, he begins with naming the chief forms: articles, monographs, conference proceedings, preprints, blogs, and more. These are well known and easily identifiable. But Anderson also hints at an opening for different kinds of work. “Research reports” is a “catch-all term that refers to any number of different scholarly products . . . often produced by think tanks, consultancies . . . or professional associations” (p. 6).

The phrase “gray literature” is sometimes used to name this category of research, signifying that it comes from sources outside conventional academic publishing and is often more difficult to locate than

standard forms of inquiry, although work appearing online increases chances of discovery and use (Farace & Schopfel, 2010). “Gray literature” comes in many different lengths and it can reflect some features of traditional publications. Indeed, to convey its commitment to innovation in the length and prose style of its books, the University of Minnesota Press describes its *Forerunners* series as “grey publications that can transform authorship” (Kasprzak & Smyre, 2017, p. 97). The press invites recognition of the desirability, as the digital conditions of research and reading influence our practices, of finding the best form for any project of scholarly communication.

It has been hard to dislodge the priority given to the article and monograph. Disciplinary habits rule, as does the academic reward system with its expectations of publishing in familiar formats. But literature and publishing scholar Kathleen Fitzpatrick (2015) has asked (with others) about our “primary forms.” She recognizes their durability. “They come to seem to us utterly natural, the shapes of thought itself. It should be said, of course, that the constraints presented by the forms of the book and the journal article have in many cases been productive, giving structure to the analysis and exploration that we undertake.” Still, the conventional formats have come to be seen as limitations. “There has, for instance, long been nothing in the large space between the journal article and the book, a space that might have been occupied by the pamphlet or

the chapbook but never was, because that *inbetweenness of shape* made them literally undistributable” (p. 458; emphasis added). Why shouldn’t the length of books be part of how we rethink what we want from writing and reading?

Swifts and Elements

In fact, by now there are many publishers of short academic books. We can even see that interest in them has a history (Weiland & Ismail, 2019). University presses have been leading the way, but SAGE can now be recognized as an important part of the story. It followed its own failed experiments (in the early 1970s) with “inbetween” publishing, with what became very successful series in research methods. The “little green” and “little blue” books, as they were called (by the publisher and users alike), offered authoritative and accessible accounts of methodological essentials (SAGE, 2015). They became handy resources for learning enough about a research method to apply it to practice. Brief was better. And in 2015 with *SAGE Swifts* the company joined the list of publishers offering books that were longer than the green and blue books but shorter than the conventional research monograph.

In effect, SAGE too proposes that there is no ideal length for a scholarly publication. Publishers and scholars are experimenting together with “inbetween” forms. Each *SAGE Swift* carries a page with this statement of what the series offers beyond the conventional length of the journal article, while reassuring scholars about legitimacy in the academic reward system: “*SAGE Swifts* aim to give authors speedy access to academic audiences through digital first publication, space to explore ideas thoroughly, yet at a length which can be readily digested, and the quality stamp and reassurance of peer review.” For SAGE speed counts, as in practically everything we do today. The quickened pace in the digital age is a sign, for some readers and critics, of the “accelerated academy” (Vostal, 2016).

While it stands by the monograph, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge UP & Oxford UP, 2019) is also demonstrating (with others, like Minnesota) the appeal and utility of alternative formats. They have launched a new series of short books of 20,000 to 30,000 words. *Elements* are described as “original, concise, authoritative, and peer reviewed.” And they are “regularly updated and conceived from the start for a digital environment.” The CUP website offers guidance for prospective authors, including attention

to marketing. But, like SAGE, they recognize the professional meanings of “inbetween” publishing. Thus, there is this response to the question of how a contribution to *Elements* would appear on a CV. “This will depend on how you organize your CV,” CUP says, but they are reluctant to urge listing as a book: “*Elements* should be listed as peer-reviewed scholarly writing published within a series with the series editor’s vetting.” That would be a novel category on an academic CV, calling attention to the fact that the publication is neither an article or a book.

Will the conventional academic rewards system recognize such work with the enthusiasm that scholars are bringing to new publishing opportunities? That is one question to be asked about the short book phenomenon. Another is: Will libraries accept the publishers’ case for the timeliness of inbetween publications, sometimes marketed as subscriptions, and welcome them as part of scholarly collections? Still another is: What do short books represent in how the digital transformation of society will influence how we understand work in what some call the “accelerated academy”? SAGE claims that its *Swifts* offer learning that can be “readily digested in a culture that expects information at the click of a button.”

Origins of the *Charleston Briefings* / Matthew Ismail

What was going on in 2015 when I began to talk to Katina Strauch (editor of *Against the Grain* and founder of the Charleston Conference) about creating the brief book series that eventually became *The Charleston Briefings: Trending Topics for Information Professionals*?

Most people would probably agree that scholarly publishing in the years 2010 to 2015 was experiencing an ongoing sense of “disruption.” Sales of academic monographs were steadily declining, as university libraries bought fewer books and relied more heavily on just-in-time purchasing plans. The relentless move to digital in academic journal publishing, where the print format was becoming almost irrelevant, and the rise of the self-published e-book with the launch of Kindle Direct Publishing in 2007, only made book publishers more anxious about what would happen to them in a digital environment. With the relentless demand that academic publishing make the transition to an open access model, which journals can fund with an APC, book publishers were in an even greater bind.

After all, the economy of book publishing is very different from the economy of journal publishing—there were no helpful parallels between sustaining an OA journal by charging authors to publish an article and charging a book author to publish an entire book. What does it even cost to produce a book? \$20,000? \$30,000? There was no widely accepted number. And how is a humanities professor going to pay \$20,000 to publish a book, anyway, to say nothing of a scholar from a developing country? As book sales declined and the open access movement attacked the very notion of the pay-to-read scholarly publishing economy, what were publishers to do?

Of course, such a situation can either be viewed as a crisis or as an opportunity. And some professional publishers—and even an amateur like me—definitely saw this environment as an opportunity.

I broached the question of creating an inbetween book series with Katina Strauch and Tom Gilson (Charleston Conference mainstay and associate editor of *Against the Grain*) in 2015 and suggested that there is space in the market for brief professional e-books. We discussed the oft-heard complaint that trade business books, which are typically about 50,000 words or 180 pages, could have made their points in about a third of the length.

We discussed why we think these business books are so bloated and decided that they are published at 50,000 words because this allows publishers to charge \$25 for the hardback and \$15 for the paperback or Kindle versions. If the books were only as long as they needed to be—perhaps 20,000 words!—they would also not be profitable. Little did I know, in 2010 Amazon had launched a brief e-book series of 10,000 to 30,000 words, called Kindle Singles, with the slogan “Compelling Ideas Expressed at Their Natural Length.” An Amazon executive said, “Ideas and the words to deliver them should be crafted to their natural length, not to an artificial marketing length that justifies a particular price or a certain format.”

So much for my “new idea”!

At any rate, we decided that we should create an e-book series that addresses the professional concerns of the audience that typically comes to the Charleston Conference at a length that is appropriate to the content. Since we were talking about the *Briefings* as e-books, the length could be whatever we wanted it to be.

Though Katina was enthusiastic, we were told repeatedly that established publishers had already tried to launch brief book series and that they had been failures. We were told that, despite the obvious fact that many people complain about the bloated 50,000-word business books, 10,000 to 20,000 words is too short for a book and too long for an article. It just can’t be done. Yet, innovation was certainly in the air—so we did it anyway.

The audience we imagined for the *Briefings* was the people who attend the Charleston Conference: librarians, publishers, entrepreneurs in information technology, vendors, and consultants. Our focus from the beginning was on producing readable, timely, and focused brief e-books that would provide an expert overview of significant professional topics. We specifically wished to avoid an academic writing style and presentation, while maintaining rigor and professionalism. We suggested that authors aspire to the tone of serious journalism, such as that found in the *Atlantic* or the *New Yorker*.

One early question was how we would actually produce the series, which we had initially called *Against the Grain Executive Summaries*. I initially suggested that we use the Kindle Direct Publishing platform for the e-books and CreateSpace for the Publish on Demand version of the *Briefings* to avoid expensive publishing services—but once we began to discuss paying freelancers for design and editing services, and how we would host and distribute the books, it became obvious that this wouldn’t work. We’d never sell enough copies for Katina to break even, and we did need to recover our costs.

We decided, therefore, that we would work with Michigan Publishing to produce the volumes, and make the series open access, and look for sponsors for volumes and the series.

By the time we had launched in September 2017 with David Durant’s *Reading in a Digital Age*, we had agreed upon a series summary, which was as follows: “*The Charleston Briefings: Trending Topics for Information Professionals* is a thought-provoking series of brief books concerning innovation in the sphere of libraries, publishing, and technology in scholarly communication. The *Briefings*, growing out of the vital conversations characteristic of the Charleston Conference and *Against the Grain*, will offer valuable insights into the trends shaping our professional lives and the institutions in which we work.”

We afterward published *Briefings* on library publishing, library marketing, the contemporary challenges to the system of peer review, and accessibility in libraries and publishing. Our “inbetween” publishing venture has been successful because we focused on producing excellent books for an engaged audience at a length that is natural to its goals.

A Charleston Briefing in Class / Steven Weiland

I encountered the Charleston *Briefings* after I had begun offering a regular graduate seminar, Scholarly Communications in the Digital Age (Weiland, 2015). Needless to say, questions of reading had an important role in the syllabus. There was already a considerable literature on the question of print vs. screens and allied matters reflecting new ways of thinking about traditional academic literacy, particularly (in my case) among expert readers.

With the debate about reading on screens as a backdrop, I made a place for David Durant’s *Reading in the Digital Age* (2017). It was up-to-date, represented the key features of reading as a practice and a subject of inquiry, was rich in citations for probing the subject further, was composed for professionals but avoided a specialized vocabulary and syntax, and it was accessible via open access. What it was, though I didn’t have the term then, was an “inbetween” text. My students and I found that we not only learned a good deal about reading in the digital age but that the format itself prompted attention to a timely theme in today’s transformation of scholarly communications: Have we neglected alternatives to the article and the book?

Conditions of Composition

Beyond the classroom I see the *Briefings* as designed for the conditions of professional learning, where organizational or institutional responsibilities can constrain opportunities for textual study. Here are the conditions I imagined for the audience for my own *Briefing*, now under review: *The Scholarly Workflow in the Digital Age: Finding Order, Managing Overload, and Encountering the Accelerated Academy*.

Time

What is available? Of course, professionals bring considerable learning to their work. But they are also learning along the way. Individual professionals and institutions weigh how much attention they can give

to activities that may add to knowledge, abilities, and workplace opportunities. Academic professionals are, presumably, talented and enthusiastic readers. But they also have to manage, on the front lines, so to speak, the bane of life in the digital age—information overload. Variety in formats for reading recognizes as much while maintaining the vitality of text—in print or on screens.

Depth

How much is enough? The essence of a monograph is a comprehensive and in some cases an exhaustive account of a single subject. Of course, articles try for less; capitalizing on the limits of length, many are shaped by the famous APA guidelines for structure. That allows them to be read relatively quickly, if the article itself is read at all. A journal publisher said recently that perhaps it would be better business to make articles themselves free and charge for the abstracts (Nicholas & Clark, 2012). But for different readers “enough” means different things. In domains where there is lots of work to choose from, the short book offers more room to determine the scale of inquiry a reader is seeking.

Accessibility

What is the right register? I use the term in my teaching to name the appropriate voice for a writing or speaking task. According to the OED, the term “register” is often used in music, as in the particular range of tones that can be produced in the same way and with the same quality. In language it refers to a variety or level of usage, especially as determined by social context and characterized by the range of vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax, and so forth used by a speaker or writer in particular circumstances. A short book is made accessible when its author avoids highly specialized language (or jargon) and eases the path of a reader looking for enough depth with a modest allocation of time.

My *Briefing* has the structural features of a book—organized in chapters—but the limits of an article in that each chapter conveys only the essentials of its subject. Transitions between chapters are compact. And all along I kept the idea of “introduction” in mind, with an extensive bibliography to indicate the range of the subject and to guide readers who want to know more to useful resources.

While the *Briefing* reflects what I think is worth attention in the scholarly workflow, I don’t appear

directly as an author. And, oddly enough, my 22,000-word *Briefing* took about the same time to write as a 10,000-word scholarly article based, as many are, on extensive empirical research, interviews, observations, or surveys and the often voluminous data they yield. The fieldwork I did, I like to say, was at the library, or at least in the print and online resources (voluminous in their own way) our library makes available. It is a typical project in the humanities or the humanistic sectors of the social sciences. That is, the *Briefings* reflect the work of their authors as readers with the professional experience they bring to their subjects. They are works of practice and research.

The title itself suggests the choices I made as an author, with *Briefings* editor Matthew Ismail's guidance. Thus, there are, in the first part, accounts of terms. These recognize that there can be big themes even in a short book. From there the text is specialized in attention to that part of scholarship and science we call the "workflow" but, mindful of the situation of many information professionals (or the "conditions" named above), it attempts to reach across the disciplines to characterize what is common to all scientists and scholars.

Finally, and despite the fact that I don't appear directly in my *Briefing*, I can say that the unusual format allowed for a scholarly experience that, in

inviting steady reflection on the format, demonstrated the uses of more variability than we have had in scholarly communications.

Conclusion: A "Perfect Mess" of Academic Publishing

The scholarly foundation for academic careers may be stronger than ever but the research workflow is evolving, reflecting both the availability of new digital resources and the choices individual scholars make in their practices at different rates and with different expectations for digital innovations. In a well-functioning "information ecology" new technologies, like novel publishing formats, "are carefully integrated into existing habits and practices" (Nardi & O'Day, 1999).

It is often observed that postsecondary institutions are slow to change. Historian of higher education David Labaree (2017) believes that the competing interests in the system making this so are actually its strength. Short books, including the *Briefings*, can be seen as part of what might be, with more inbetween forms, the "perfect mess"—the phrase Labaree favors for American higher education—of academic writing and publishing, from gray literature to magisterial university press books. "Inbetween" can be a fruitful location for our experiments in scholarly communications.

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