Breakout session: The Monograph

Facilitators:
- Lynne Withey, University of California Press
- George Breslauer, Letters and Science
- Anthony Newcomb, Music

Session description: The Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of Scholarly Publishing, seated by the Modern Language Association in 1999, reported that even as they face growing economic problems, university presses are receiving ever more submissions as a result of increased expectations for advancement and promotion. Participate in a discussion that examines alternative options - especially for humanists and social scientists - to traditional book publishing.

The following are informal notes taken during the breakout session. They are not intended to serve as a verbatim transcript of the proceedings.

Prof. Newcomb began by asking if the participants could agree that the scholarly monograph or book in the humanities and social sciences was not likely to disappear any time soon. The discussion that followed suggested general consensus on the point, but a wide range of views on the problems we face in sustaining this form of publication and how to address them.

Prof. Breslauer observed that contrary to Walter Lippincott’s prediction young scholars can still find a publisher for their first book. He has not seen social science assistant professors at Berkeley or graduate students finishing their dissertations here who were unable to get high quality book manuscripts accepted for publication. The situation may, however, be different at less prestigious institutions or in different disciplines.

Ms. Withey defined the central problem: that increasing numbers of books are being published, but fewer and fewer copies of any individual title are sold. Partly because of spiraling serials expenditures, libraries have less money to spend on monographs. Prices continue to rise, although at a much lower rate than for journals. (She cautioned that the data on book prices included in the handout is contradictory and not necessarily accurate.) Declining subsidies from universities have also contributed to the crisis. It is also more difficult to get published in some fields than others; manuscripts about foreign literatures are especially difficult to place.

Can university presses realize economies of scale by working together? They already do partner for sales and distribution. There are consortia of smaller presses, but it is not clear that this type of arrangement would be helpful with larger operations like UC Press.

Permissions for illustrations have become a serious burden, above all in the fine arts, but also in other humanities disciplines that make more use of images than in the past. Obtaining permissions can be very time-consuming for an author, and the fees charged have risen dramatically. You need to get at least two rights—print and digital—and many museums refuse to grant digital rights at all.

Edited volumes pose particular problems. Presses increasingly do not want to publish them, nor do they bring great rewards to their editors. Some in the audience asked whether more credit should be given to those editing volumes. Prof. Breslauer suggested these collections should be published only digitally. Ms. Withey supported this idea but noted many editors are very resistant to this solution.

In general, Ms. Withey said, the standard book publication model does not work for highly specialized scholarly books, and digital publication in itself does not result in major cost savings—development costs for identifying manuscripts, editing them and getting peer review are the largest portion of book production costs. It is these developmental costs that need to be funded from sources other than sales. An alternative model for the publication of such material is offered by the International and Area Studies Digital Collection, a collaborative venture of UC
Press, CDL and research units on eight UC campuses, [http://repositories.cdlib.org/uciaspubs/](http://repositories.cdlib.org/uciaspubs/). The review and editorial process for the edited volumes and monographs is assumed by the research units involved. It was noted, however, that this program depends on the campus making funds available for these editorial costs.

It was suggested from the floor that university presses have an obligation to publish scholarly material that would otherwise not be available, and that parent institutions should increase or restore subsidies to free them from commercial constraints. This would allow the revival, for example, of the various “UC Publications in…” series, which were extremely important outlets especially for highly specialized research. One professor pointed out that many dissertations in his field are solid contributions to scholarship but are of no commercial interest. It doesn’t make sense to ask a young scholar to rework such a study to make it more saleable.

Ms. Withey said she would not favor putting more money into the traditional system. Instead she favors more use of the distributed publishing model, in which presses provide the management know-how while faculty take primary responsibility for reviewing and editing.

Should the academic review process be changed to put less emphasis on the book, as recently recommended by the Modern Language Association? Those who addressed this issue thought not, at least in the humanities and social sciences, where successful completion of a “major project” is still seen by many as the proper standard for tenure. Prof. Breslauer saw the problem as lying not in the book requirement, but in the amount of time junior faculty were allowed for fulfilling it. The timetable has been tightened up in recent years, and it might be better to begin the tenure process after the sixth year rather than the fifth. Pressure to finish a book in time to get tenure sometimes also leads junior faculty to publish work prematurely. There are differences between disciplines: it seems to take longer for an author to produce a book in history, for example, than in sociology or political science. There was some discussion, but no consensus as to whether expectations in departments had increased “from one book to two” as a requirement for tenure.

It was noted that some universities give “title subsidies” to junior faculty to assist them in finishing their first book. This would likewise be desirable at Berkeley.

*notes by John Roberts
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