

Reflections on the 'Academic Book of the Future' project

Marilyn Deegan reveals the progress and achievements of this timely exploration



Marilyn Deegan, Professor of Digital Humanities at King's College London, was a Co-Investigator on the Academic Book of the Future project.

The fact that in January 2017 we are, for the second time, engaging in major country-wide celebrations of the academic book is testament to the success of the first Academic Book Week in November 2015. It is testament too to the project that initiated Academic Book Week – the Academic Book of the Future – which came to an end in September 2016, and which will be making available its final report in early 2017.

The Academic Book of the Future project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the British Library in response to widespread concerns about books, publishing, libraries and the academic world. Declining monograph sales, rising serials prices, funding problems, rapidly changing new technologies, shifting policy landscapes, all contributed to a sense of unease about the health of the academic book in the arts and humanities, and indeed in the health of the disciplines themselves. Run by a team from University College London, King's College London and the Research Information Network,¹ what has been special about the project is the way we chose to carry it out, engaging communities of practice across the whole complex ecology of academic writing and publishing, and interrogating a wide range of cross-cutting themes and issues. It was a challenging set of tasks we set ourselves, but we believe the results have shown that the approach worked.

First of all, we tried to define what it is that we (and indeed the funders) mean by an academic book. Monographs are a fundamental means of sharing the fruits of research in the humanities; they are deeply woven into the way that we as academics think about ourselves as scholars. Other book-length outputs, such as critical editions, are also significant, and non-print formats like performances, film, musical compositions are key research outputs in certain disciplines, but the monograph remains central for many reasons. Recent moves towards open access, initially intended to enable scientists to make research results available more widely for the advancement of knowledge, have called into question many of the ways we understand the writing, publication and reading process, and the diverse and complex routes that a book can take on its journey from writer to reader. The rapid advance of digital technologies has changed the publication process and loosened the bonds between text and print, making it possible to think of the 'book' as a different entity, something that could exist in a variety of forms: on a shelf, on a computer, in a smartphone. In turn, this has opened up all sorts of other possibilities for communication, sharing and enhancement around the central concept of the book. However, there is a concern that pressures on academics to do more teaching, more research and more administration – and to respond to ever more assessment regimes – might have eroded their capacity for sustained writing. In this environment, is the monograph still viable? We are pleased to report that the answer is a resounding 'yes', with more titles being published than ever before (though worryingly sales of

1. Dr Samantha Rayner (UCL) was Principal Investigator. Mr Nick Canty (UCL), Professor Marilyn Deegan (KCL), and Professor Simon Tanner (KCL) were the Co-Investigators. Dr Michael Jubb was the project's consultant at the Research Information Network.

each title are declining), and a continuing belief in the monograph as central to the humanities. Interestingly, print is still preferred by readers for sustained reading, though ebooks are valued for accessibility. Most monographs are now made available as ebooks, and there have been exciting experiments in the development of enhanced monographs, marrying text with data and multimedia content. But while such enhancements suggest some useful possibilities for one of the futures for the book, they are as yet a minor development in comparison to the overwhelming proportion of long-form publications still in monograph form, though often now delivered as ebooks or via print-on-demand.

The electronic format has many benefits, among them the ability for publishers to make available back-list titles long out of print and to create cohesive sets of scholarly works across disciplines. For instance, Oxford Scholarship Online integrates over 13,000 titles published over the last 50 years, while Cambridge Core provides access to over 30,000 ebooks and 360 journals, going back as far as the beginning of the 20th century. Kathryn Sutherland, too, in this issue, points out that ‘humanities scholars already benefit from the huge cultural investment in digitising our older print heritage’. With primary and secondary sources from across many centuries becoming increasingly available, the academic book of the past now has a more assured future too.

The communities we engaged with during the project were academics across the arts and humanities, publishers, both university and trade, libraries, booksellers and policy-makers. Though we were a UK-based project, reporting on issues of key concern to academics here, we took account of many projects outside the UK offering useful models and perspectives to consider. In the US, where concerns about the position of the monograph in the academy are equally pressing, a whole range of pertinent reports have appeared in the last few years. US university presses, facing severe financial challenges with declining sales, are making new alliances between the press, the library and the wider university and exploring other reshaping initiatives. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has recently funded a number of projects to develop new capacity for the production of enhanced monographs; some \$10 million has been disbursed to 21 projects, most of which have library and faculty involvement in the publishing process. In Europe, too, there is concern about the place of the monograph in the ecology of scholarship, with a particular emphasis

on open access. The OAPEN project (Open Access Publishing in European Networks), hosted from the National Library in The Hague, is dedicated to open access, peer-reviewed books, and has published a number of useful reports and surveys. OAPEN-UK, a collaborative research project gathering evidence to help stakeholders make informed decisions on the future of open access scholarly monograph publishing in the humanities and social sciences, carried out an

extensive survey of UK academics in 2014, and released its final report in 2016.² The OAPEN-UK survey has greatly informed our work on open access during this project, as has the HEFCE report, *Monographs and Open Access*, produced by Geoffrey Crossick.³

The Academic Book of the Future project has had some notable successes, among which was Academic Book Week 2015, with over 70 events and activities – seminars, workshops, debates, symposia, exhibitions (both physical and virtual), writing sprints, competitions, promotions – taking place throughout the UK and interna-

tionally. During that Academic Book Week, the project team produced a collection of essays in the Palgrave Pivot format containing short contributions from across our communities.⁴

One somewhat unorthodox, though hugely popular, activity of Academic Book Week 2015 was the 20 Academic Books that Changed the World competition. The shortlist of books was chosen from a long list of 200 titles submitted by publishers and contained some unusual choices that one would not normally include in the category of academic book: the works of Shakespeare and Orwell’s *1984* for instance. What the competition did was engender a discussion about academic books and their importance across the general public. There were articles in major national newspapers. There was huge international interest, with reports on the vote from as far away as Mozambique, South Africa and Venezuela, as well as across the anglophone world. Lively debates ensued around the definition of the terms ‘academic’ and ‘book’. The vote was a public one, and a member of the public who contributed a blog to the Academic Book project website suggested that it would be an unusual person who had read all 20: that is probably as true of the academy as the wider public. Andrew Prescott, Theme Leader Fellow for the AHRC’s ‘Digital Transformations’, commented on the winning title that ‘*Origin of Species* is the supreme demonstration of why academic books matter’; and Tom Mole, from the University of



The first Academic Book Week, in November 2015, featured a list of ‘20 academic books that changed the world’ – as displayed here in Blackwell’s University Bookshop in Liverpool.

2. Ellen Collins and Caren Milloy, *OAPEN-UK Final Report: A five-year study into open access monograph publishing in the humanities and social sciences* (January 2016).

3. Geoffrey Crossick, *Monographs and Open Access: A Report to HEFCE* (January 2015).

Edinburgh, added ‘The fact that this book was written by a man who never held a university position, and that it was not published by a university press, should remind us of the importance of sustaining academic books in all their forms.’ The competition also stimulated publishers themselves to think about the influence their academic books were having, and a number of blogs were written by publishers with suggestions as to why their publications had changed the world. Oxford University Press was bold enough to suggest five of their own books that might shape the future.

So what do we leave as a legacy for the project? First of all, a major report to be released in early 2017. This looks in detail at the diverse and changing roles of all those in the intricate supply chains concerned with the production and use of academic books: academics, publishers, librarians, and the myriad intermediaries (distributors, library suppliers, booksellers, etc.) along the way. It considers the key issues of open access, the relationship between print and electronic, preservation, publishing processes, peer review, legal issues, and demand, discoverability and access. It offers a number of recommendations to funders and policy-makers to ensure that the academic book and its central role in the humanities are acknowledged and nurtured. But this is far from our only deliverable. The project website will live on for some considerable time, hosting a plethora of content: major reports such as Tanner’s analysis of the 2014 REF,⁵ and Watkinson’s survey of the academic book in the US,⁶ over 50 blog posts covering many of the themes of the project; reports of meetings, conferences, workshops, book sprints sponsored by the project; think pieces about the academic book and its continuing relevance (or not). There is too a major innovative publication in production: BOOC (Book as Open Online Content),⁷ which will appear from the newly revived UCL open access press. This presents peer-reviewed content in a range of formats (articles, reports, blogs, videos) on a dynamic, evolving open platform. It is intended that BOOC will continue the conversations around the academic book and its futures. UCL Press will provide a stable home for this to grow and thrive.

Many of our participants have commented that the connections and links between and across communities have been the project’s most significant contribution; there are plans in place to foster these. In March 2016, Liverpool University Press hosted the first ever university press conference in the UK, and what surprised the organisers was not just the strength of the response from UK presses, but the engagement from presses and

academics from outside the UK. A number of new UK university presses have been established recently, often as partnerships between the library and the wider institution, and generally as open access. These were well-represented at the conference, along with more established organisations, giving a real breadth to the discussions. Selected papers from the conference were published in a special (open access) issue of *Learned Publishing*.⁸ This conference was so successful that the next two have already been planned, in partnership with the Association of Learned and Scholarly Publishing (ALPSP). The next will be organised by UCL Press in 2018, the following by Cambridge University Press in 2020. As Anthony Cond, Director of Liverpool University Press, told us, ‘without question the conference only exists because of the project’.

Another major activity that we initiated will also, we intend, have a life beyond the end of the project: investigating the position of the academic book in the Global South. This was an important strand of the project, in partnership with Dr Caroline Davis from Oxford Brookes University. With generous sponsorship from the British Library, a conference in March 2016 brought together participants from Africa, India and the Middle East, as well as the UK. In accordance with our philosophy of connectedness, these came from academe, publishing, libraries and archives, and the discussions were around the challenges that our colleagues in the South face, some of which accord with our own concerns. One colleague remarked how enlightening it had been ‘to realise we have so many different perspectives and, yet, we all share the same goal: promoting knowledge in the South and about the South’. Many also commented that they had never been to an event that drew in people from across the South, rather than from specific regions. An important outcome here has been the firm intention to establish a network to strengthen the connections and promote further work and collaborations across and within national and professional boundaries. Funding is already being sought for this.

At the conclusion of the project, we envisage a variety of futures for the many different kinds of academic ‘books’, most likely to derive from dialogue between the aspirations of the scholarly community and its funders on the one hand, and the wide range of publishers, libraries and intermediaries with expertise in the transmission of knowledge, and meeting those aspirations, on the other. Bringing so many of these together to start those dialogues is what this project has been about. ■

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The connections across communities have been the project’s most significant.

4. Rebecca E. Lyons and Samantha J. Rayner (eds), *The Academic Book of the Future* (Palgrave, 2016).

5. Simon Tanner, *An analysis of the Arts and Humanities submitted research outputs to the REF2014 with a focus on academic books* (Academic Book of the Future report, November 2016).

6. Anthony Watkinson, *The Academic Book in North America: Report on attitudes and initiatives among publishers, libraries, and scholars* (Academic Book of the Future report, September 2016).

7. <https://ucldigitalpress.co.uk/booc-v1.1/BOOC/>

8. *Learned Publishing*, ‘Special Issue: The University Press Redux’, 29:S1 (October 2016), 313–371.