

What Has the COVID-19 Pandemic Taught Us about Academic Book Publishing So Far? A View from North America

CHARLES WATKINSON

In mid-March 2020, a rash of emergency “lockdown” orders from state governors confined millions of North American workers to their homes. Students suddenly needed to flip from classroom-based to remote instruction. Scholars in the humanities could no longer get to archives. Movement restrictions cut off the opportunity to travel for fieldwork and conference attendance almost overnight. As publishers and librarians dealt with the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic on their personal lives and relationships, they also embarked on a massive experiment in transforming access to scholarly information. Rather than being a unique benefit only available to members of a library subscriber’s “gated community,” access to hundreds of thousands of books and journal articles suddenly became freely available globally. That access, of course, had severe limitations. It was temporary (most programs expired at the end of August 2020), only available to users with an internet connection, and far from comprehensive in its coverage. However, a massive experiment was still underway, and the results are proving transformative for publishers and libraries.

So, what did we learn about humanities scholarship and its publication?

First, we learned that there are very few humanities fields in which ebooks cannot substitute for print. The actual pain points that scholars in specific disciplines described suggest gaps in ebook functionality rather than fatal flaws in digital reading. For example, some archaeologists struggled to flip between a fold-out map and the description of the stratigraphic units in a large format printed dig report, scholars in Asian studies expressed despair about the shortage of digital books in non-Roman characters, and students missed being able to make marginal notes on their textbooks, advertising shortfalls of current online annotation tools. It is true that there is still a way to go in creating ebook formats and levels of availability that meet all the affordances of print. However, 2020 was the year in which print as the version of record for monographs went the way of the journal article, with profound implications for publishers (like many university presses) whose revenue model has relied on print sales. (The University of North Carolina Press reported in 2019 that 85% of its revenue came from print

sales.) As US libraries opened up access to print collections again in the fall of 2021, visitors saw few new print titles added to the shelves, except when specially requested. They also found much more robust digital spaces, with a proliferation of new ebook products and platforms.

Second, we discovered an untapped global thirst for even the most esoteric subjects. In one of the most significant social experiments of the pandemic, 80 publishers participating in Project MUSE (based at Johns Hopkins University Press) made over 300 journals and close to 25,000 books free to all users during much of 2020. Ebook copies of monographs that had sold fewer than 200 copies, mainly through US wholesalers, suddenly showed spikes of use all over the globe. This use wasn't just from robots or casual browsers. When the University of Michigan Press made its ebook collection of 1,500 titles free to read, users were invited to share how they had found a book and what they were using it for. A teacher in North India passionate about Japanese poetry praised the speed with which the ebook downloaded onto his phone; a retired judge living in small-town America rediscovered his love of the classics, begun long ago during his college years; an environmental activist in Spain used expensive political science monographs to build advocacy resources for future campaigns. Many independent and precarious scholars described their feelings of relief and gratitude in not having to beg and borrow authentication through a library. "Meeting" such enthusiastic and grateful readers, previously hidden by a network of intermediary vendors, helped locked-down publishing staff discover a new sense of mission. Ground down for years by the conflation of lack of physical circulation with a lack of interest, humanities publishers saw the passion unleashed when access to monographs became ubiquitous and easy. Publishers who were long-term skeptics of open access have become proponents, although still worried about how to sustain it financially.

Third, we discovered that the same infrastructure gaps that led us to run out of toilet paper, sourdough starters, and automotive semiconductors were just as present in the world of scholarly communication. Gaps in affordable connections to the internet showed up as blank spaces in ebook usage maps, especially in Africa and much of South America. The inability of mainstream library suppliers to easily keep track of which ebooks were free to read led to the proliferation of crowdsourced lists such as "Vendor Love in the Time of COVID-19." Prior investments in creating files that could be printed digitally, as well as made into ebooks, richly rewarded publishers who could switch to remote printing in other regions when their warehouses were closed and shippers disrupted. Institutions that had sometimes reluctantly paid their dues to the multi-institutional HathiTrust Digital Library became more willing to do so. They found that the ability to "switch on" digital versions of most of their print books through its Emergency Temporary Access Service (ETAS) was of incalculable value to their researchers.

As tools for downgrading the COVID-19 pandemic (vaccines, masking, social distancing) allow more three-dimensional social interaction and restored access to physical resources, publishers and librarians recognize the landscape of “scholarly communication” in the humanities is permanently changed. In the future, they realize that there are some big questions to address.

How can we best meet the unmet needs we observed outside the confines of institutional paywalls? Multiple deep niches of readers are as passionate about sub-fields in the humanities as those who are paid to study them. That’s no surprise to Egyptologists, military historians, or philosophers. As every publisher who has attended those disciplinary conferences can attest, it’s the people without “University of” on their badges who stagger away from the exhibit booth with the biggest piles. However, what can we do to make it easier to study Japanese poetry in the foothills of the Himalayas? Or relax with a French literary text in a Midwest US prairie town? Seen at a global scale, an unserved market of deep divers emerges who may be unable to spend much money but are generous with their time and are just as capable of understanding a specialist argument as any graduate student. They also demonstrate that “public engagement in the humanities” does not require “dumbing down.” Many readers outside the academy are already as engaged and sophisticated as those within it. There are still opportunities to intentionally provide pathways to deeper understanding, as venues such as *The Conversation* or *Hyperallergic* do. Still, the clear writing that distinguishes the best academic authors (whether affiliated or unaffiliated with a higher education institution and whomever their audience is) has universal appeal.

How do we help these readers discover books and journals they can access? As the exponential growth of humanities titles in the Directory of Open Access Books (DOAB) and Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) shows, a lot of literature is becoming permanently open access. However, good luck in doing a subject search for just open access content! Because US libraries have outsourced cataloging to companies such as EBSCO and ProQuest that rely on sales revenue to fund human-powered metadata enrichment, there is little incentive to surface open access books or even identify them as such. Small humanities journals are sometimes less visible because their publishers can’t create and distribute metadata (something DOAJ exists to help with). Academic books are also often invisible to the computers that mine full-text and metadata because the standards used in book publishing cater to print rather than electronic discovery. That’s because the trade giants dominate US book publishing and focus on selling best-sellers through Amazon.com rather than serving the needs of academic libraries. The consequence is that humanities book publishers spend all their efforts on BISAC codes (designed to help booksellers in arranging shelves), ONIX feeds (heavy on availability statuses), and ISBNs (using the same 13-digit UPC format as cereal boxes). Their focus on the print supply chain leaves little time for allocating digital object identifiers

(DOIs), Open Researcher and Contributor IDs (ORCID), or Research Organization Registry (ROR) identifiers, the building blocks of the digital ecosystem. The challenge of managing temporarily free-to-read materials during the pandemic and the switch to open has catalyzed some libraries to rediscover the importance of “technical services” that were in danger of being consigned to the building’s basement. The combination of untapped demand for poorly tamed information has also opened the doors to increasingly sophisticated informal organizations. The pirate site Z-Library, for example, offers millions of books and journal articles for free with a robust search mechanism and clean user interface. Based probably in Russia, outside the boundaries of copyright policing, Z-Library is both a symptom of unmet global demand and an existential threat to many academic publishers’ current sustainability models.

How can librarians and publishers sustain an ecosystem of humanities publishing in which access to the digital version of each title is free? Who pays the cost of publishing in fields that lack the grant funding of science, technical, and medical fields (STM)? The recognition that open access models that require authors to pay article processing charges (APCs) or book publishing charges (BPCs) are fundamentally inequitable to the many who cannot pay has led to new “hybrid” funding models. Several North American university presses have combined parent institutional support, payments from individual libraries and consortia, and grant funding where available to support OA book publishing. These include the Direct to Open program from the MIT Press, Fund to Mission from the University of Michigan Press, and the multi-institutional membership model that powers Lever Press. Beyond the university presses, “scholar-led” publishers such as Punctum Books and many library publishers provide options that rely on substantial volunteer labor and support in kind. All of these models rely on library support to a greater or lesser extent. Already under pressure from the inflationary costs of STM periodicals, this funding may not be able to scale. The Toward an Open Monograph Ecosystem (TOME) initiative is jointly led by the Association of American Universities, Association of Research Libraries, and Association of University Presses. This program aims to bring provosts to the table, providing funding for their faculty members to publish books as open access that is separate from the library’s allotment. An open question that the University of North Carolina Press is exploring is whether individual scholars will be willing to spend money on print copies of books that are available open access. Their Sustainable History Monograph Pilot already suggests that this may vary by field.

What has changed about how humanities scholars author their works? One of the unexpected side effects of the forced move to online conferences during the COVID-19 pandemic has been a flattening of the previous inequalities of participation. Scholars who are unable to travel (or cannot afford to) are no longer excluded. Meanwhile, chat features on platforms such as Zoom and breakout room functionality allow graduate

and undergraduate students to have side conversations as the professor speaks. Tools such as Overleaf or Google Docs provide collaborative writing environments that complement video conferencing. It will be interesting to see whether the normalization of such tools catalyzes the move toward more team-based humanities research. Publication platforms that facilitate integrating rich media and text, such as Manifold and Fulcrum, are seeing more adoption. The University of Michigan Humanities Collaboratory recently incubated three collaborative writing projects by interdisciplinary and intergenerational teams under the title “The Book Unbound.” The teams worked from the start with colleagues from the library and press, and the process was documented in video. The constituent *Developing Writers in Higher Education* study shows how the multilayered “pyramidal book” envisaged by Harvard historian Robert Darnton in 1999 is now being realized. An “engagement layer” leads to a “reading layer” (also fossilized in book form) that links to a “data layer.” Paths between the layers allow a “skimmer” to discover the work, become motivated to immerse themselves as a “swimmer,” and then investigate the underlying data as a “diver.” The National Gallery of Art developed this terminology to describe their approach to museum publishing, as captured in the final report of the Getty Foundation’s Online Scholarly Catalogue Initiative (OSCI). It is powerful both in structuring a single publication and visualizing the respective roles of humanities centers, publishers, and libraries in supporting multiple publications.

Career advancement norms that require humanities professors to publish at least one and maybe two books to gain tenure have traditionally held back innovation in publishing modes. However, when non-tenure-track faculty account for about half of all faculty appointments in American higher education (according to the American Association of University Professors), do the same markers of prestige apply? Beyond having any job in academia at all, let alone one with a living wage, a more significant concern for most faculty in the humanities than promotion and tenure (P&T) may be the metricization of research. Research information management (RIM) systems are now ubiquitous in the United Kingdom and Australia and are spreading rapidly throughout North American universities. These systems harvest information about publications, grants, and other “faculty outputs” and connect it with institutional human resource systems to power profile pages, activity reporting, and databases of collaboration opportunities. Behind the scenes, they also deliver dashboards to academic administrators that can be naively used to make personnel decisions. Michigan Research Experts is a faculty profile system powered by Symplectic, one of the leading RIM providers. Symplectic is owned by the same parent company as Springer Nature and competes with Elsevier Pure, Clarivate Converis, and Ex Libris Esploro. These large commercial organizations leverage the well-structured publication information found in STM fields but stumble in the humanities. If a humanities book doesn’t have a DOI, an ORCID, or a ROR identifier in its metadata, it will likely not be connected to an

author profile. Digital projects in the humanities have even less chance of showing up in an administrative analytics dashboard. Beyond such omissions, the very logic underpinning what deserves to be measured is shaped by disciplines such as medicine that have very different values and priorities compared to the humanities. This point is made eloquently by the HuMetricsHSS initiative that seeks to advance a “values-enacted” approach to academia. Such values-based practices are now informing the development of academy-owned networking tools such as Humanities Commons.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the fragility of the hidden infrastructure that supports daily life in North America. When a Zoom connection fails during a presentation, our reliance on internet-enabled technologies becomes painfully apparent. In publishing and librarianship, researchers have asked increasingly pressing questions about what constitutes the infrastructure of knowledge and who controls it. In doing so, they have revealed how dependent we are on a few technology companies whose decisions shape not only who has access to information but also how humanities work gets evaluated and what forms its outputs take. The growth of “open” (open source, open data, open publications) challenges the mechanisms of control and thus is in constant tension in North America, which has a capitalist bias toward scale and efficiency. As President Joe Biden challenges his compatriots to “build back better,” our challenge is to do so in ways that are true to the values of the humanities.