The Perilous Future of Academic Publishing

The story is already out. Academic publishing on all fronts is in the midst of a sea-change. As with most momentous shifts in the nature of communication, the causes of this change are complex and often misunderstood, and its implications have been painfully slow to materialize. Nevertheless, the future of academic publishing is already upon us. How will we respond?

The change has two dimensions: 1) With the sudden and dramatic development of the possibilities for electronic communication and publication that we have witnessed in the past ten years, new options for communicating with each other have fostered new modes of disseminating ideas: synchronous and asynchronous discussion (chats, MOOs, email discussion lists, web boards, news groups; videoconferencing); electronic document cycling (email attachments, annotation tools, file exchange); and electronic publication (eJournals, eBooks, digital repositories, print-on-demand, CD-ROMs, digital video). What are the implications of these new forms of communication for scholarly publishing? What impact do they have on the social and professional lives of teachers, writers, and scholars? As disciplinary practitioners whose livelihood depends on our ability to disseminate information, we need to consider carefully not only how we answer these questions, but also whether we do so when the time is ripe or whether we wait until we've already missed the boat. New technologies have already changed the nature and forms of communication. We need to watch (or act) now to see if the culture that supports academic research and publishing can change, too.

I fear that many people in our discipline of rhetoric and composition, and even English studies generally, will be hurt by the slow pace of institutional reform when it comes to acknowledging the scholarly and intellectual work we do. MLA President Stephen Greenblatt recently distributed a letter to department administrators on behalf of MLA's executive council notifying constituents of the dire financial situation of many academic presses (university presses in particular) and urging us to reconsider traditional guidelines for tenure and promotion. (See Ruark and Montell.) At many universities, junior faculty need to publish a printed book at a scholarly press if they hope to make it through the gauntlet of tenure and promotion. Those guidelines are rarely verbalized explicitly in print, but they exert their pressure nonetheless. The reactions to Greenblatt's dire message have been supportive, but few institutions are likely to be proactive with change when attitudes are so entrenched. Most likely, many will wait until strong candidates for tenure—without published books—are poised on the abyss. Only then will there be some pressure to consider the possibility that there are alternative ways to measure scholarly success beyond its association with the "well-placed book."

Many university presses have had to severely cut back on not only the number of books they publish annually, but on the opportunities for anyone who is not already an academic superstar to make it even to the first round of peer review. As an editor of a well-received series with a university press, I have...
seen firsthand that the future Greenblatt envisions is already upon us and actually has been for some time. University presses have had to rely increasingly on their trade books to offset their losses on scholarly books. That situation creates a trickle-down effect such that even scholarly books tend to be judged perhaps too much by sales potential instead of by contributions as cutting-edge research or fresh answers to persistent intellectual problems. Even as actual printing costs have declined, university presses have seen market demand for printed scholarly books fall dramatically, while experiencing great pressure from state legislatures to operate at a profit, or at least not as far in the red as they have in the past.

According to a published report in the *Chronicle of Education*, most university presses in the United States failed to meet their own budgets last year ("University Presses Suffer Bleak Financial Year"). Commercial scholarly presses—typically offering royalty terms to authors 75% below what university presses offer—published three times as many books as university presses in 2001 (Ruark). These presses have helped meet the demand of the author-market, certainly. As royalties decline across the board and requests for subventions from university presses increase, will we allow uninformed (or at best, antiquated) ideas about what signifies scholarly merit to support a system of vanity publishing? How resistant will our institutions be to Greenblatt's plea for us to recognize the value of alternative forms of scholarly work? The problem now is that it is becoming clearer that university presses and commercial academic presses may not share the same values that we use to legitimize (and evaluate) our scholarship.

University libraries, which used to be the biggest supporters of university press publications, have had to cut back drastically on the number of books purchased. Libraries also struggle to provide ample resources in an equally dire economic situation. Subscription rates for journals, many of whom have been subsumed by commercial publishers, have risen exhorbitantly. Some journals in rhetoric and composition that publish at most 10 or 15 articles annually charge institutions more than $100 for a yearly subscription, even though production and printing costs are lower now than they were ten years ago. In other fields, subscription rates for major print journals in the field are substantially higher. In addition, the increasing availability of electronic sources, some at no (or low) cost means that libraries have begun to rely more heavily on the open access to information that the Internet (potentially) allows. One wonders: if it costs more, is it necessarily better scholarship?

In English Departments across the country, I suspect there are those who have accepted unquestioningly the notion that "anyone can publish electronically" and who would rather evaluate a colleague's scholarship not on its merit, but on a vague or outdated hierarchical system that ranks the quality of the scholarship exclusively by a journal's medium or by name recognition. That attitude, I believe, is more rampant and thus more damaging in the humanities, where electronic publication has thrived, even as its status as valuable scholarship has met with resistance. Interestingly, in "Should You Publish in Electronic Journals?" Aldrine E. Sweeney's report on a survey of faculty and administrators in the University of Florida system, faculty seemed more sharply divided on the issue of whether "electronically published articles should be counted in the tenure and promotion process." Nearly 30% of faculty respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed, compared to 16% of administrators. In the humanities, where electronic publication is less common than it is in technical fields, faculty may be even more opposed. Still, there is so much good scholarship already being published on the Web and not just by anyone with a connection to the Internet, but by first-rate editors, as well as new and established scholars who must meet the test of rigorous review, just as they would for a print journal. It may take some time to reshape the culture that supports electronic publication, but there appears to be some hope that it's not an impossible task given the favorable reception of electronic publication Sweeney finds in his respondents, especially among those who have the final word on tenure and promotion decisions.

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