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THE EVER-CHANGING WORLD OF ACADEMIC PUBLISHING

The aim of this chapter is to provide you with just enough information about the world of academic publishing to find your bearings and with luck navigate your way in due course towards a contract. After a brief overview of the industry as a whole, it then focuses on the key issues preoccupying academic publishers today that are of relevance to the would-be author.

The world of academic publishing is undergoing a significant and prolonged process of change. The days of leisurely lunches and gentlemanly agreements over a glass of port have long since gone. When I first started working as an academic editor it was still possible to pretty much guarantee publication of your thesis in some disciplines as long as you had the support of your supervisor and your supervisor had the right connections. As you will be aware, that is no longer the case. Academic publishing is in many ways like any other billion dollar business. Global markets and the ability to package and repurpose content are key considerations and editors no longer have the freedom to publish what they like. Although the preferences and interests of individual editors can shape a list, ultimately they are simply one more

cog in the corporate machine. If the books they commission don't sell they are out of a job, so their commissioning decisions are based not only on the academic excellence of a book but also its marketability and, increasingly, its value as copyright material that can be exploited in a number of different forms. Finding your way around this complex world and making informed decisions is not easy and you will need to have some understanding of this environment if you are to publish your thesis successfully.

One of the key factors you will need to be aware of – and this relates directly to the issue of copyright mentioned above – is the impact of the internet and electronic publishing. The extraordinary advances in knowledge management over the last 25 years have been felt nowhere more keenly than in the field of academic publishing. So completely have these developments altered the mindscape that even those who remember sharing one computer to an office, or hours spent in the university library looking up references with nothing but the books themselves to search through, can scarcely believe such a world actually existed. To use the word 'revolution' in this context for once hardly does justice to the complete change in attitudes and working practices that the advent of the internet and electronic publishing have brought about.

Yet while everyone recognizes the extent of the changes that have occurred there remains little consensus as to their significance. The death of the book has been predicted on numerous occasions with varying degrees of conviction since the 1980s. Clearly reports of its demise were exaggerated and nowadays most predictions about the future of publishing envisage a world where the book is no longer the dominant form but simply one of a number of different formats in which content can be provided.

This multiplicity of formats and publishing models may in some part account for why it is so difficult to predict the future of academic publishing. It may also explain why (in my opinion) there are so few analyses of the business that bear any resemblance to the experience of those who work in it. How do you characterize a business that on the one hand operates like a global industry with a few, huge companies generating billions of dollars worldwide, and on the other includes the equivalent of artisanal studios that produce a handful of

carefully crafted books a year and barely make ends meet? Between these two extremes there are of course publishers and content providers of every type and size. Alongside the major scientific, technical and medical (STM) publishers such as Reed Elsevier, Kluwer, Wiley, Springer and Thompsons, co-exist mid-size firms set up by an individual or family (such as LEA or Sage) and a number of American university presses with sizeable endowments which enable them to operate pretty much free of financial constraints. There are learned society publishers, smaller university presses and specialist presses focusing on one subject area such as management studies or social theory. Finally there are others with charitable status like Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, who fulfill their charter to pursue the dissemination and furtherance of knowledge at the same time as generating surpluses or profits (in the case of Oxford in significant amounts) which are then ploughed back into the University.

The key issue here is that differences in size inevitably lead to differences in culture. If you work for a large multinational that employs thousands of employees in offices around the world your working practices and attitudes are going to be different to those of someone working for a small university press employing say 30 people all of whom work on the same site. Whether one is better than the other is beside the point and will probably vary from organization to organization. The important thing is to be aware of these differences and their possible implications for you when considering potential publishers. I discuss the various factors you will need to bear in mind when choosing a publisher at length in Chapter 4. For now the main point is that though people often talk about academic publishing as if it were a homogenous field of activity, it is in fact as diverse and multifaceted as most areas of human endeavor and encompasses a huge range of working practices, attitudes, cultures and business models.

Some key issues

Despite these differences, however, there are a range of issues that all academic publishers, be they multinationals or boutique presses, are

currently grappling with. Their success in dealing with them will in large part determine not only their own survival but also the nature of academic publishing in the future.

These issues all relate to the revolution in knowledge management mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. The publication and presentation of information and ideas, and the way in which such material is accessed and organized has been totally transformed by the development of electronic publishing and the advent of the internet. Numerous new ways of presenting academic material such as online journals and resource centers, accessed and funded through individual or institutional subscriptions have been developed. You can now buy academic content not simply in book or journal form but in electronic or hard copy, and as much or as little as you want. Amazon for instance offers a service called Amazon Pages whereby you can purchase anything from one page, to a couple of pages, to a whole chapter to view online and Amazon Upgrade allows you to purchase print and online versions of the same text at a specially discounted rate.

Not only has there been a transformation in the way scholarship can be accessed, but also in the sheer volume of material available. Google Print Library has caused some anxiety amongst publishers by announcing its intention to digitalize the full text of all books in the public domain excluded from copyright. Even more controversial was Microsoft's strategic partnership with the British Library to digitize 25 million pages of out of copyright books and then make them available, presumably for a fee, on MSN Book Search and through The British Library National Digital Library. Although this initiative has now come to an end as abruptly as it started no doubt leaving the British Library much to ponder as it contemplates its future digitization plans.

While many of the world's largest and wealthiest research libraries have for some time been investing millions of dollars in developing virtual libraries of electronic books, these electronic books were created by, and purchased from, publishers. What is different about the Google and Microsoft initiatives is that other kinds of knowledge providers, infinitely larger and more powerful than any publisher, are muscling into their traditional territory and transforming for ever what has been described as the 'information ecosystem.' The fear is that these knowledge providers, unaffected by any native predators,

will spread unchecked, so that the existing delicately balanced diversity is destroyed. You could of course argue that this is simply the effect of market forces and a good thing too if it increases customer choice and brings down prices. The danger in the longer term, however, is that if a handful of even the most benevolent organizations control both information and the means to access it worldwide, the end result is a form of, albeit unwitting, censorship. A relatively small group of people would control the definition, creation, development, dissemination and access to knowledge and inevitably the world would be a poorer place, spiritually, creatively and economically. So while one might dismiss some of the concerns expressed as being rooted in self-interest and protectionism on the part of traditional publishers, there are also real issues that all of us need to address.

There can be little doubt then that a major revolution has occurred, one that has had, and will continue to have, wide ranging consequences, not all of them foreseeable. It is also interesting to consider how this revolution differs from that which saw the advent of the printing press 600 years ago. There are clearly many parallels between the issues outlined above and those that faced societies in the fifteenth century regarding the control and use of knowledge. Both revolutions for instance resulted in a greater democratization of learning. The fact that anyone with access to a printing press could swiftly and cheaply produce not only books but also pamphlets, tracts and newspapers meant that there was much greater freedom of expression. New ideas could be circulated widely and quickly, relatively free of the distortions of the scribe or the censorship of the church which until then had a monopoly on the creation and dissemination of scholarly learning. The advent of the internet and the availability of not just books online but also the rich archives of private institutions and elite universities has had an equally liberating effect. For the first time the poor student or scholar living far away from the great centers of learning, possibly on another continent, potentially has equal access to all of the resources of modern scholarship. Previously they may have had to travel great distances or submit themselves to a vetting process, call on referees or sponsors to even be allowed within the doors of the great research libraries. Now they can simply read online those same pamphlets, old newspapers, tracts and historical documents that were

made possible by the previous revolution. The pursuit of learning is no longer bounded by the same physical or financial constraints as before, and depends largely on having access to the internet and sufficient intellectual curiosity.

Another common factor is that both print and electronic revolutions have involved technological developments that greatly facilitate the physical manipulation of knowledge. This has enabled readers to search for specific facts and ideas more efficiently and has freed them from the constraints of a linear, narrative development. Consequently both revolutions also lead to the development of a greater variety of forms, in the case of the printing press to the novel and the newspapers, pamphlets and tracts mentioned above; in the case of the digital revolution to the blog, the e-book and the online resource centre. One significant difference, however, is that while the illuminated manuscript for reasons of cost and efficiency was fairly rapidly superseded by the printed book (except possibly as a luxury item), the printed book remains, even in what has been dubbed the digital age, a remarkably versatile and popular piece of technology. It is easy to use, easy to transport, aesthetically pleasing, relatively cheap to produce and requires no other technology to support it. It also has the crucial advantage over the electronic book (at present) that it is much easier to read. Despite the fact that electronic books are able to offer a level of searchability that is very valuable if one is looking for particular references or examples, reading onscreen for long periods of time remains a difficult and unattractive prospect. People dislike reading large amounts of text online so much that they have been known to buy whole electronic books and then laboriously print them up at home in order to read them. They then end up with large sheaves of paper that are neither easily searchable nor manageable.

There can be little doubt that human ingenuity and technology combined will eventually find a way around this problem. Huge amounts of resources have already been invested in trying to develop better reading devices and there was much excitement in the publishing world first over the launch of the Sony Reader, and more recently with the Amazon Kindle. The Kindle is a handheld reading device which mimics the look and feel of a paperback but can store up to 200 books and offers a form of wireless interconnectivity that allows the user to

purchase and download additional books at the click of a button. Neither device is cheap though – the Sony Reader was around \$299 when first launched, the Kindle \$399 – which has clearly limited their mass market appeal. (To what extent is hard to gauge – at the time of writing Amazon were complaining that they could not manufacture quickly enough to satisfy demand). Perhaps the Kindle will be the breakthrough technology but so far no one has developed a device, and in particular a screen, that is as easy on the eye as the printed page. Until they do, any book which depends on narrative flow and the gradual development of complex, inter-connected ideas is likely to remain much easier to read in hard copy than in an electronic version. It is tempting to declare ‘The Book is dead. Long live the book!’

Except of course we cannot afford to be complacent. Sales of academic monographs have steadily fallen since the 1970s. Many university presses struggle to maintain their scholarly publishing programmes and it has been claimed that some of them lose as much as \$10,000 on each monograph they publish. If this is true in more than a handful of cases it is hard to see how they can survive or indeed how in some disciplines the printed academic monograph can avoid extinction.

Yet it is very hard to be certain whether this contraction in sales is due to the development of the electronic book or to more general market forces. It may be the case in the US, the largest scholarly market in the world, that there are simply too many university presses producing too much product of an insufficiently high standard to satisfy their potential consumers’ requirements. What we are seeing could simply be a natural correction in the market. It is hard to tell. Certainly the evidence I have seen seems to suggest that where both electronic and paper copies of the same monograph exist side by side, neither form effects the sales of the other, at least initially. With reference works it seems to be the same though there is some suggestion that over time the availability of the electronic format does erode sales of the paper version. With journals I think there is little doubt that the online journal will supersede the paper version and that the latter will soon, with some few exceptions, be a thing of the past.

The impact of electronic resource centers such as EconPort or the Centre for Hellenic Studies in Washington are harder to judge as they

are still at a relatively early stage in their development. EconPort hosts materials for lecturers and students interested in the burgeoning area of experimental economics. It provides a valuable service to that community by acting as a focal point for all those interested in this comparatively new area and brings together materials that would not otherwise be easily accessible. It hosts datasets, some electronic monographs, lab manuals and a textbook. The site for the Centre for Hellenic Studies provides research and teaching materials which have all been carefully vetted by a team of top scholars and includes not only pre-published materials but also an established monograph series, a database on papyri and a journal. It facilitates the review and dissemination of high quality, highly specialized material that might not be commercially viable in printed form. In both these cases it seems likely that rather than replacing traditional printed materials they will continue to provide a valuable service by supplementing and complementing them.

How this affects you

So what do these interesting but rather sweeping developments in the pursuit of scholarship, the preservation of knowledge and the never-ending battle to protect intellectual freedom mean to you? More specifically what is their relevance to getting your PhD published? The answers to this question are manifold but I hope, having read this chapter, reasonably clear.

First of all, when thinking about whether to publish your PhD and if so how, you will need to bear in mind that you are dealing with an industry that is in flux. An industry that faces constant change, and thus faces as many threats as it does opportunities. An industry that is not really an industry and encompasses a huge range of organizations from specialist university presses publishing in only a handful of areas to huge multinationals. As a result you will find a vast range of cultures, working practices and services on offer.

The next most important point is that the advent of the internet and of electronic publishing has caused a revolution not only in the way

scholarship is carried out but also in the way it is communicated. Perhaps in part because of the resilience and adaptability, not to mention the user friendliness of the old technology (the printed book), it has hung on side by side with the new much longer than anyone had originally predicted. No one knows how much longer it will last (though my own hope is that it will carry on forever). Whatever does happen there are now a vast range of different ways in which scholarly work can be published and you will need to consider them all carefully before deciding on your preferred option. Some of these different means of dissemination and publication are discussed in the next chapter.

For the record my own prediction is that the printed book will continue to be a significant output in academic publishing in the humanities and social sciences for at least the next 10 to 20 years and that is why much of the rest of this book is devoted to the process of getting your thesis published in printed form. It is also the area in which I have most expertise. Having said that much of what follows will be relevant whatever medium you choose as long as it relies on a process of peer review.