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The Crisis in Scholarly Publishing in the Humanities

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Editor's note: In August, the author becomes Dean of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. These remarks were presented at the 2003 Annual Meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) in a session on "Crises and Opportunities: The Futures of Scholarly Publishing." The papers from the meeting are available on the ACLS Web site <<http://www.acls.org/ex-03am.htm>>.

In a paper given at Dartmouth College last November, and written in response to Professor Greenblatt's letter to the members of the Modern Language Association (MLA),¹ I said:

If we can tackle large problems, with the resources of the computer, the network, and interdisciplinary collaboration, then stand-alone, single-author work on smaller problems is eventually going to seem...quaint.

I realize that this is a tendentious statement, and I realize that my colleagues will regard its prediction as outlandish. But I do believe that the detailed and thoughtful fretting that we have been doing over the fate of the humanities monograph will seem--from the perspective of a not-too-distant future--beside the point, and all our carefully constructed responses to the crisis of scholarly publishing will be beside the point as well. In short, I believe we are, as the saying goes, preparing to fight the last war. I also believe that there is a way out of the present situation, although not without a leap of faith--or, to be more biblically precise, not without casting our bread on the waters.

I'll explain, but first let me say that my beliefs are born out of:

1. Nearly twenty years of active research interest in publishing, and especially in scholarly publishing
2. Thirteen years experience as founding coeditor and then editor emeritus of the Internet's first peer-reviewed electronic journal in the humanities, *Postmodern Culture*
3. Ten years experience as the first director of the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities (IATH) at the University of Virginia

4. Eight years as member and then cochair of the MLA's Committee on Scholarly Editions
5. Three years as chair of the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) Consortium, an interdisciplinary and international body of scholars and technical experts devoted to standards for the creation of machine-readable literary and linguistic texts.

I also speak to you as someone who got tenure in a top-ranked English department without authoring a book--tenure was based, instead, on article-length pieces, many of which were published electronically, and on applied research (in electronic scholarly publishing)--and as someone who was recently promoted to full professor and appointed Dean of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois, with a joint appointment as professor of English, still without a book.

The purpose of reciting this litany is not to impress you with my credentials--or to amaze you with my success in their absence--but rather to demonstrate that the ideas I ask you to consider are based on direct, extensive, and personal experience, as well as research and experimentation.

To begin with, I do accept that there is a crisis in scholarly publishing in the humanities, and I agree with Professor Greenblatt (and the Association of Research Libraries, and others) that this crisis is to a significant extent the result of rapidly increasing prices for science, technical, and medical journals from commercial publishers. I also agree with Professor Greenblatt that the most straightforward solution to the problem this crisis poses for tenure and promotion is to accept several scholarly articles in place of a book. This solution requires relatively little adjustment: we are already familiar with the genre of the scholarly article, and we already value publication in this form; we would simply need to value it more. And from a business point of view, scholarly journals are more viable than Philip Lewis gives them credit for being, in his article titled "Is Monographic Tyranny the Problem?"² Books sell once, journals sell three or four times a year--they are a renewable resource, economically speaking--and often journal profits carry book publishing in the presses that do both.

Another more or less traditional form of scholarly output that could be an alternative to the monograph is the scholarly edition. If the profession were of a mind to broaden its definition of tenurable work, broadening it in this direction would accomplish several things. First, it would reward the kind of work that is required, in each generation, to keep the cultural record up to date and in good repair. Second, it would promote this renovation at a time when great portions of that record are going to be transferred into electronic form, whether carefully selected and edited or not. A concerted effort to recognize and reward electronic scholarly editions might increase the odds in favor of the survival of the best, rather than the cheapest, texts.

Another proposal that has been discussed is subvention, and Professor Alonso has put forward the idea of MLA-sponsored subvention/prize committees, as a way of avoiding the appearance of departments buying publishing opportunities for their faculty.³ The problem with this idea is that even if every MLA member gave \$10 a year to this cause, there would be funding for about 50 of these \$7,000 subventions--and even if aggressive fundraising on the

part of the MLA were to double those numbers, a hundred subventions a year would hardly make a dent in the situation, when university presses in the United States and Canada publish roughly 11,000 books a year.⁴ And you can bet that if the award is competitive, and there's a chance of making a mistake by giving it to someone unknown, those 50 or 100 subventions will go to people whose reputations are already established, unless they are specifically restricted to untenured scholars.

Perhaps we simply can't afford to publish in the way that we have been--in fact, perhaps the audience for humanities monographs is so small that this sort of book publishing can never be profitable. This assumption is at the core of Stevan Harnad's 1994 "Subversive Proposal."⁵ If you haven't read this piece, and the responses to it, this would be a good time to review it. In summary, Harnad says that scholars are more interested in having their work read and used than they are in making money from it; that scholars have hitherto signed their work over to publishers because, in the print world, that was the only way to disseminate their work so that it would be read and used; that in the electronic world, authors don't need to make this "Faustian bargain"; that when the audience for scholarship is small, there's really no way that a publisher can afford to publish a book anyway; and that the reduced cost of electronic-only publishing for small audiences should be met in advance--by subsidies or through page-charges.

In a response to that article, in 1997, I said that all of this was right on the mark, but taking *Postmodern Culture* as an electronic-only example, nobody was offering to pay our costs up front, and we didn't imagine it would be good for our submissions if we were to become the only humanities journal with page charges. So, often, there's a sort of stalemate preventing the implementation of perfectly reasonable ideas about how to solve this crisis: one journal can't initiate page charges if no others do it; one department can't change its tenure requirements if no others do; one faculty member can't decide to skip the book...well, actually, one can, but it was frankly a very risky thing to do, and I wouldn't recommend it. Still, perhaps these changes are more likely to come from the bottom up than from the top down, more likely to come from authors than from tenure committees, or journals, or publishers.

The Thematic Research Collection

If that's true, then I predict that the genre of scholarship that will replace the book will be the thematic research collection. This genre has been independently identified by at least two different people before me--Daniel Pitti, in a talk given in Ireland in 1999⁶ and Carole Palmer, who has a chapter on the subject in the forthcoming Blackwell's *Companion to Digital Humanities*. The genre describes most of what we produce at IATH, and what other humanities researchers, often with less support, less funding, and less encouragement, are producing on University Web servers around the world. In a talk I gave at the University of Minnesota in 2001,⁷ I defined thematic research collections as:

1. Necessarily electronic (because of the cost of 2, 3, 8)
2. Constituted of heterogeneous data types (in other words, multimedia)
3. Extensive but thematically coherent
4. Structured but open-ended

5. Designed to support research
6. Authored (and usually multi-authored)
7. Interdisciplinary
8. Collections of digital primary resources (and they are themselves second-generation digital resources)

Thematic research collections offer the author all the benefits Professor Alonso ascribes to the book, in his recent "Editor's Column" in *PMLA*, though sometimes in slightly different forms: "the choice of texts, the marshalling of sources and evidence, the construction of an argument that spans several chapters, the bibliographic research, the engagement with the readers' reports, the reading of proofs, the choice of journals for review." I could provide examples of IATH projects that have traced each of these steps--the Blake Archive, the Rossetti Archive, the Whitman Archive, the Valley of the Shadow, and others.⁸ And I'm sure the faculty who have assembled, edited, annotated, and analyzed these thematic research collections would agree that they are the result of what Professor Alonso, in the case of the scholarly book, describes as a "protracted and somewhat enigmatic process to which many people contribute, sometimes unbeknownst to them."

Now, I would not for a minute suggest that these thematic research collections are less expensive to produce than a scholarly book--far from it. Nor would I suggest that they are an easier nut to crack, from the point of view of the business of publishing. But in spite of both of those things, I think they may be more viable, because they have something that most scholarly books do not, namely an audience. It's hard to sell five hundred copies of most humanities monographs; few sell in the thousands. And yet, these Web-based projects, on relatively esoteric subjects, receive thousands of visitors each day, serve up gigabytes of their content to avid users each week, and reach readers of all ages, inside and outside academia, and around the world. The only problem is that they're free.

Enlarging the Audience for Humanities Scholarship

Or maybe that's not such a problem. Let's take the case of *Postmodern Culture* again. It has always been a free electronic journal, but since the mid 1990s, it has also been a licensed electronic journal--you can get it for free, or you can pay for it. Most individuals get it for free. Most paying customers are institutions, who buy it as part of Project Muse. You could argue that they're just buying that package, not the title, and that's perfectly true--but *Postmodern Culture* is one of Muse's top 10 most heavily used titles, so clearly the end users--who could be using the journal on the free site--are choosing to use it as part of the licensed resource. Why? Better searching, for one thing, and searching in the context of a hundred other humanities journals.

More to the point, perhaps, given the stalemate problem, why did Johns Hopkins agree to take us on, and allow us to continue distributing the journal for free at the same time they were licensing the journal? The answer is simple: we came to them with an established audience, and we had established that audience by being free. Another reason Johns Hopkins took us on was that Michael Jensen, one of the few visionaries in scholarly publishing these days, was at that time the manager of Project Muse. When we signed with Muse, we had 2,500 subscribers

to the e-mail list through which we announced new issues and we were getting about a quarter of a million visits a year on the Web. By anybody's standards, that's a large audience for a scholarly journal, and especially for one that published articles with titles like "Flogging a Dead Language: Identity Politics, Sex, and the Freak Reader in Acker's *Don Quixote*." In fact, I think that a solution to this crisis is, plain and simple, to reach a larger audience. We tend to condescend to the general reader, and we count her out when it comes to our mental construct of the audience for humanities scholarship--and yet, believe it or not, this is an actual e-mail I received one day in the mid-1990s, from a reader of *Postmodern Culture*:

Dear Mr. Unsworth: I'm a union teamster living in rural Vermont so I don't have a lot of access to the sort of stuff you have in your journal and you provide access to from your Web site. Our local library is swell, computerized too, but a computer search under postmodernism or poststructuralism or Derrida or Baudrillard or Jameson produces zero hits. Thank you.

Would this rusticated teamster buy up the latest book by Jameson? Maybe, if he could get his hands on it in Rutland, or wherever he is, and maybe not--but he is clearly interested in the subject, and looking for the content. Maybe we could enlarge the audience for humanities scholarship, not by dumbing it down, but by making it more readily available. Maybe if we did that, scholars would find an audience first, and a publisher second, instead of the other way around. And maybe in that world, the risk to publishers would be less, because the demand would already be demonstrated. Could we peer review in this world? Of course--and it might then be perfectly clear why we should conduct peer review independent of a decision to publish. Could we give away and charge for the same thing, in different venues? Yes, if the benefits to paying customers were real. Could books still exist? Yes, but they might often be byproducts of other activity, for example summaries or extracts of research conducted in the course of building thematic research collections. Could we collect and publish the collections themselves? Absolutely--the only clear business lesson that we have learned from electronic scholarly publishing to date is that size matters, size sells, and size is achieved by aggregation. Collections of collections, rationally organized and critically selected, would make perfect sense, and their individual components, freely available on the Web, wouldn't be cannibalizing the market, because they wouldn't have the same scale or reach.

Enough. I know that these ideas fly in the face of what we all know about the business of scholarly publishing, about the audience for humanities research, about the forms that research naturally takes, and so on. But the simple truth is that the crisis we're discussing is the lack of an audience, and I know that the audience exists--we just need new genres, new business models, and the courage of our convictions as scholars and publishers, to reach them.

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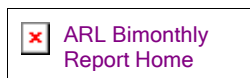
1. Stephen Greenblatt, then-President of the MLA, wrote a letter to MLA members dated May 28, 2002. Greenblatt encouraged members to discuss within their departments the scholarly communications issues affecting the ability of junior faculty to meet rising expectations for tenure. The letter was reprinted along with responses from four scholars as "Open Forum: Scholarly Publishing and the Tenure Process," *Literary Imagination* 5, no.

- 1 (Winter 2003): 151-164. [back to text](#)
2. Philip Lewis, "Is Monographic Tyranny the Problem?" *PMLA* 117 (2002): 1222-1224. [back to text](#)
3. Carlos J. Alonso, "Editor's Column: Having a Spine--Facing the Crisis in Scholarly Publishing," *PMLA* 118 (2003): 217-223. [back to text](#)
4. Peter Givler, "University Press Publishing in the United States," *Scholarly Publishing: Books, Journals, Publishers and Libraries in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Richard E. Abel and Lyman W. Newlin (New York: Wiley, 2002), <http://aaupnet.org/resources/upusa.html>. [back to text](#)
5. Stevan Harnad, "Overture: The Subversive Proposal," in *Scholarly Journals at the Crossroads: A Subversive Proposal for Electronic Publishing--An Internet Discussion about Scientific and Scholarly Journals and Their Future*, ed. Ann Shumelda Okerson and James J. O'Donnell (Washington, D.C.: ARL, 1995), <http://www.arl.org/scomm/subversive/sub01.html>. [back to text](#)
6. Daniel Pitti, "Thematic Research Collections: A New Genre in Humanities Publishing" (presented at University College Dublin, Ireland, October 19, 1999) <http://www.ucd.ie/~cosei/pitti2.htm>. [back to text](#)
7. John Unsworth, "Collecting Digital Scholarship in Academic Libraries" (presented at University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, October 5, 2001) <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/~jmu2m/UMN.01/>. [back to text](#)
8. See the IATH Web site <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/>. [back to text](#)

□ [Back to top](#)

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[Table of Contents for Issue 228](#) | [Other Current Issues Articles](#)
[Other Scholarly Communication Articles](#)



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