

The Specialized Scholarly Monograph in Crisis, Or, How Can I Get Tenure If You Won't Publish My Book?

by Patricia E. Renfro, Director, Public Services University of Pennsylvania Libraries

Approximately 150 faculty, administrators, publishers, and librarians met in Washington, DC, on September 11-12, 1997 to discuss the current state of scholarly communication and the extent of the crisis in scholarly monographic publishing. The conference was co-sponsored by ARL, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Association of American University Presses, and supported by OCLC and Yankee Book Peddler, Inc. The program aimed to explore key issues from a variety of vantage points and to foster communication across professional boundaries. Papers and discussions focused on:

- changes in the academy and in scholarship;
- expectations for and credentialing of faculty;
- the costs of monographic publishing, both print and digital; and
- current digital experiments in monographic publishing.

Stanley Chodorow, Provost, University of Pennsylvania, led off the conference by emphasizing that the decline of the monograph partly results from economic forces, but also from changes in the intellectual orientation of the humanities. Urging that refereeing and editing be preserved but separated from publication, Chodorow argued that electronic publishing will save 30% of print costs, making possible a revival of the monograph.

Many university press directors present were skeptical about the ability of the new technology to solve the crisis of significant reductions in monographic sales: annual library sales, for example, were generally agreed to have dropped from 750 to 200 copies. Marlie Wasserman, Director, Rutgers University Press, talked of the vicious spiral of low print runs and high prices, and gave a useful analysis of print publishing costs, which demonstrated that overhead, editing, marketing, and refereeing were constants between print and electronic publishing, and that the first three of these represent the largest components of monographic publishing costs. Colin Day, Director of the University of Michigan Press, admitted to a desire to "puncture the panaceas" and "eviscerate the vision" of digital alternatives, and pointed to the troubling cost shift that requires scholars to spend increased time preparing manuscripts for electronic publication and laboriously printing out electronic text.

On the topic of academic credentialing there was considerable agreement, particularly from publishers, that presses ought not wield so much power in the tenure process. Administrators and faculty chronicled changes in the tenure review process in colleges and universities over the past 30 years. Stephen Humphreys, Professor of History, University of California at Santa Barbara, talked of the "ratcheting up of standards by ordinary tenured faculty" and suggested that the crisis in the scholarly monograph is the ironic result of making the Ph.D. degree essential for undergraduate teaching and the consequent oversupply of Ph.D.s. A number of speakers suggested that the focus on monographic publishing as a tenure requirement must change, and John D'Arms, President of the American Council of Learned Societies, advocated that scholars receive mentoring during post-doctoral fellowships.

Asserting that there are still “too many books with too little to say,” and pointing out that scholars seldom buy the work of colleagues, Humphreys raised the central question of the conference: What is the real nature of the crisis? Humphreys’ conclusion, that the crisis, although very real to the presses, is not a crisis in scholarly communication, was shared by many participants. Joanna Hitchcock, Director, University of Texas Press, noted that faculty generally are not worried about the fate of the monograph, and instead identify an improvement in overall quality as fewer titles are published. Others suggested that increases in the quantity of journal publishing may be providing a forum for material previously published in monographs. Scott Bennett, Yale University Librarian, urged that the discussion focus more broadly on scholarly publishing, asking why university presses are so little engaged with scholarly journals and wondering whether presses best use their resources and talents by publishing large numbers of monographs that have few readers.

Following discussions on the interdependencies of the academy, scholarship, and publishing were descriptions of a number of innovative digital publishing projects. Kate Wittenberg, Editor-in-Chief, Columbia University Press, discussed the Mellon-funded Columbia International Affairs Online (CIAO) initiative to create a database of monographs, conference proceedings, working papers, abstracts, and sites for reader feedback.

Carol Mandel, Deputy Librarian, Columbia University, described the Columbia Online Books Evaluation Project, a multi-year study of online use and costs that combines material from Oxford University Press, Columbia, Garland, and Simon and Schuster. Early findings indicate that online books are used more than their print equivalents, that they get substantive use as well as browsing, and that they attract interdisciplinary use. Most valued features are searching, browsing, and printing. Cost studies suggest that even at pre-production levels the incremental cost for an electronic version of a book may be modest. Noting that a goal for the project is to retain and expand the library market, Mandel suggested that there is also potential for an expanded market of individual scholars. Future plans include the possibility of developing digital collections and databases in related fields.

Illustrating the trend toward subject-oriented digital publishing, Norris Pope, Director, Stanford University Press, outlined the HighWire Press plans to provide inexpensive access to Latin American material online. Stanford is using the design expertise of computer science students to integrate online text with the local workplace of individual scholars in order to evaluate the economics of online scholarship. Describing the CIC proposal for university publishing, Sheila Creth, University Librarian, University of Iowa, pointed to the powerful combination of interests and expertise resulting from the planned collaboration between presses, libraries, and computing centers.

Some of the most thought-provoking comments of the meeting came from Clifford Lynch, Executive Director, Coalition for Networked Information. Stating categorically that all current evidence points to the fact that electronic versions of print monographs won’t work, and that distributed printing of long works is a non-starter, Lynch suggested possible directions for new publishing. Noting that images will be as easy to produce as words, Lynch suggested that new publishing will be visually rich; interactive media will play a key role; a new generation of scholars will be conditioned to write in different ways; effective presentation will be based on non-linearity; and the intricate relationships made possible by the Web will influence scholarship. Some of the issues in this new environment will be: living versus fixed documents, giving/assigning credit, identifying what’s new, and dealing with reader expectations.

The conference succeeded in opening a lively dialogue among librarians, scholars, university press publishers, and administrators. It raised more questions than it answered, broadened perspectives, and stimulated new thinking. In her introduction to the meeting, Kate Torrey, Director, University of North Carolina Press, promised that the dialogue would continue; let us hope so.

To sustain and broaden the dialogue initiated at the conference, ARL published the presented papers on the Web <http://www.arl.org/scomm/epub/program/html>, and will publish a print edition in early 1998.

© *ARL: A Bimonthly Newsletter of Research Library Issues and Actions* 195 (December 1997).
Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries.

[Table of Contents for Issue 195](#) | [ARL Newsletter Home](#)



[ARL Home](#)

© Association of Research Libraries, Washington, DC
Maintained by [ARL Web Administrator](#)
Last Modified: August 3, 2001