

Notes of meeting 4 November 2013

Present

Professor Geoffrey Crossick, School of Advanced Study, University of London (Chair)
Caroline Brazier, British Library
Ian Broadbridge, Arts and Humanities Research Council, representing RCUK
Samantha Burrige, Palgrave Macmillan
Professor Nandini Das, University of Liverpool
Dr. Martin Paul Eve, University of Lincoln / OAPEN
Richard Fisher, Cambridge University Press, representing The Publishers' Association
Brian Hole, Ubiquity Press
Professor John Holmwood, University of Nottingham
Ben Johnson, HEFCE (Secretary)
Professor Peter Mandler, Royal Historical Society / Cambridge
Cecy Marden, Wellcome Trust
Caren Milloy, Jisc
Dr. David Prosser, Research Libraries UK
Dr. Frances Pinter, Knowledge Unlatched / Manchester University Press
Professor Alison Yarrington, Association of Art Historians / University of Hull

Apologies

Sally Hardy, Regional Studies Association

Item 1: Introduction and project overview

1. By way of introduction, the Chair briefly described the provenance and parameters of the project, the anticipated role of the Expert Reference Group (ERG), and the wider context around open access and monographs. This included clarification that the goal of the project was to move forward thinking in an open-ended way across a range of long-form publications including monographs, edited collections and scholarly editions, and not to produce firm recommendations to HEFCE and the other research councils and funders. It was also noted that 'monograph' was used consistently to cover this wider range of long-form outputs.
2. The Chair outlined the main objective of the project: to produce a report that identifies and clarifies the issues around monographs and open access, supported by data and other evidence and inputs gathered through discussion with the ERG and more widely. The report would be presented from the Chair to HEFCE, who would receive it on behalf of the other funders. It was clarified that with the ERG as advisor, rather than author, the report would be freer to present the complex character of the debate.

3. With the aim that the ERG draws on the widest possible range of sources to gather the richest possible diversity of evidence and views, members were asked to engage within their networks on this topic and report back any views, evidence or other findings to the ERG. For its part, HEFCE would be establishing a web-page on the HEFCE web-site to house meeting papers and other documents, and would be creating a new Twitter presence to monitor the online debate.

Item 2: Terms of Reference for the ERG

4. The Chair clarified that, in gathering evidence, the ERG would have a dual role: first, to advise on what further research would need to be commissioned to generate new knowledge and insight in this area, and secondly, to bring to attention any existing research that can be drawn upon to support understanding.
5. The Chair highlighted that members of the ERG should feel they have the opportunity to suggest items for discussion at future meetings.

Item 3: Discussion of issues

6. The Chair introduced the paper, which describes the three objectives for the project: to explore the nature and scale of any difficulties that monograph publishing is facing; to enquire into why the monograph is so important to the academy, both in terms of its ability to communicate ideas and evidence effectively and of its function in testing the scholarly capacity of the author; and to examine how this relates to and affects any emerging business models for open-access monograph publishing. It was noted that no assumptions were being made about the fate of the print monograph, but that it was likely that scholarship in the humanities and social sciences in the future would be at least influenced, if not transformed, by the rise in both the prevalence and importance of digital, online and open-access modes and models of communication, and that the exploration of issues around monograph publishing would need to be examined within this wider context.
7. The following general comments were made:
 - a. Any difficulties faced in book publishing would likely differ across the various book forms. Further, publishers' continued or rising preference for some forms (e.g. edited collections) could come at the expense of others. It would therefore be necessary to be mindful of the risk of overgeneralising in favour of monographs.
 - b. It was suggested that any new research being undertaken into academics' attitudes towards the book could benefit from a scenario planning approach.

- c. It would be important to avoid overly focussing on the UK environment. There are a number of international issues that would be important to take into consideration:
 - i. the rise of open access publishing and its effects on the perceived dominance or otherwise of Anglophone publications, particularly journals
 - ii. the importance of open access and monograph publishing to the developing world, particularly where monographs may be more common in the sciences
 - iii. the greater dependence of humanities and social science scholarship on more localised ecologies, which includes local languages
 - iv. the varying speed of adoption of e-publishing across different countries compared with the UK
 - v. the varying practices for publishing PhD theses across countries and how these relate to expectations and mandates around open access, including issues around the role of the university press, third-party rights, and the effect on the scholarly process
- d. It was noted that distinctions could be made between open- and closed-access books, and online and print books. It would be necessary to consider how these all interplay – in particular what role closed-access e-books would play in transforming the monographs landscape.

8. The ERG discussed each of the three objectives in turn:

The 'monograph in difficulties' objective

The project should develop an evidence-based understanding of the scale and nature of the difficulties that are thought to be facing monograph publishing.

9. It was recognised that robust data is needed of patterns and trends of publication, particularly of monographs and in humanities and social sciences, in order to underpin exploration of this objective. Though the difficulties in gathering comparable data were noted, it was felt to be desirable to explore several decades' worth of data, particularly including time series of average sales figures, the overall volume of publications compared with the size of the research ecosystem, the extent to which peer review practice and coverage has changed, and variation in patterns of publication across the various book types.
10. There are a number of important and interdependent considerations to be borne in mind when gathering this data or forming conclusions from it, some of which may form additional inputs to or foci for any new research:
 - a. There is a question of whether there is either a need for the current volume of publications to be sustained, or whether there is instead an overproduction of research outputs. The answer to this question could

- affect our judgement of the materiality of any difficulties faced by monograph publishing (but may depend on the specific cause of the difficulties). This is linked to questions asked by the 'culture' objective.
- b. It would be important to understand how publisher behaviours may have changed over time, which may include trends towards publishing less specialised material, trends towards e-book publishing more generally, and adaptation to trends in the readership towards shorter forms of publication.
 - c. There is a question around the relevance of broader data to particular disciplines, and whether conclusions should be sensitive to differences in how book sales relate to the financial sustainability of the wider discipline. In the arts, for instance, print publishing of exhibition catalogues underpins the sustainability of the exhibition more widely.
 - d. The importance of the role of the editor to drive up the quality of monographs was noted.
 - e. The effects of the interactions between books and book reviews would need to be understood better – one area is the importance of the book review to awareness-raising, contrasted with price variance between journals and books, the time-lag between publication dates for books and their reviews, and any diminishing willingness of journals (OA or otherwise) to continue to publish reviews.
 - f. The effects of the interactions between monograph and journal purchasing more generally would also need to be understood better, for instance, how the drive towards 'big deals' for journals may be leading libraries to buy less desirable material, leaving less room for making positive and quality-driven monograph choices.
 - g. The continued importance placed by the academy on rankings, and the exclusion of monograph data from the rankings methodologies, were noted with concern.
 - h. While it was noted that sales figures may be difficult to gather, authors' experiences might be more amenable to aggregation or comparison. Areas of investigation may include the ease of getting accepted for publication and the timescales for getting to publication.

The 'culture' objective

The project should develop an evidence-based understanding of the place, purpose and appropriateness of the scholarly monograph within the overall ecology of scholarly communication in those humanities and social science disciplines where it plays a significant part. This should include, amongst other issues, the importance of the monograph to scholarly communication, to reputation and career progression, and to student learning.

11. In discussion of the key cultural features of the monograph, the following points were made:

- a. On length, it was noted that while there ought not to be a prescribed length for a piece of research, monographs have historically allowed for longer research to be communicated. The move to digital communications should open up opportunities for greater flexibility on length, but the role of editor would continue to be important in making judgements about length.
- b. On scholarship, it was recognised that there were certain modes of thinking that are only available to the author once the process of writing a monograph has been gone through, and this should be separated from questions of access and demand.
- c. Linking these two points was an observation that variety in publication forms can contribute to increased pluralism within disciplines, and academic consensus over form (particularly journals) can contribute to unwelcome intellectual hegemony within a discipline. The case for monographs would therefore need to include their contribution to academic pluralism, but this would need to be considerate of both the esteem in which monographs are held within and outside disciplines and the attitudes toward pluralism more generally within and across different disciplines.
- d. On technology, it was noted that possibilities to create new, dynamic forms would need to be assessed in terms of actual scholarly demands and requirements, and should take costs, quality and sustainability into account. It was noted that lessons should be learned both from developments in recent years in the text book world, and from the current focus on 'digital humanities' where attitudes to technology may be masking underlying shifts in scholarly attitudes towards digital publication.
- e. Pertinent to examining the possibilities presented by technology would be a question around how the humanities and social sciences can increase the visibility and impact of their work.
- f. It was argued that innovations in research communication may be likely to be influenced or driven by innovations in the business of teaching, some of which may be skewing the debate around innovation in a way that must be defended against by the research community.
- g. On intellectual property, it was recognised that this is a contentious but legitimate area of concern for the author, the institution and the publisher, but for monographs in particular there may be a case to be made that author ownership of the output is more deeply felt, and that the longer timelines for doing the research (which in some instances may include the author's PhD) may contribute to this. Connected to this are questions around licensing and open access, all of which would need to be explored in depth.

The 'models' objective

The project should examine the role that innovation in publishing and access models can play in ensuring that the various benefits and attributes associated with the monograph can be sustained. This will involve examining a range of opportunities, risks, challenges and solutions, which should include an identification and examination of current and emerging models for monograph publishing, with particular reference to open access models.

12. While it was recognised that certain models (e.g. an APC model) may already have easily identifiable issues, but that other models (e.g. freemium, print-on-demand) may have greater potential acceptability, it was also recognised that the environment was not at a stage where definitive judgements on particular models were either possible or desirable, and that it was unlikely that any single dominant model would emerge soon, if at all. It was felt, then, that the primary goal should be to identify the desirable features that any new models would need to display in order to be acceptable to the academic community, as well as the barriers to innovation or success that may need to be tackled.

13. The following points were made during discussion:
 - a. It was noted that the current model of publishing depends to a great extent on volunteerism within the academy culture, and this volunteerism would continue to be an important part of any new model. Within this context, it was noted that the viability of certain existing models that are growing in prominence, such as the university press model, also depends on volunteerism.
 - b. It was felt that proper, rigorous peer review was an essential and non-negotiable feature of the monograph publishing world and would need to be preserved, and successfully signalled to the reader, within any new model.
 - c. Strong quality control was also believed to be important, which may include preserving or enhancing the role of the editor. Signalling that this quality control had taken place would be important, too, and may include the emergence of book series.
 - d. Curation and preservation of the digital form would be necessary, but would bring costs, and these costs would need to form part of any business model. In particular where the monograph has taken on a more dynamic form, this may bring higher costs.
 - e. Discoverability and distribution of monographs was an issue that would need to be looked at, particularly given the less-than-obviously centralised nature of online communication more generally. This would need to include an international perspective.
 - f. Within all of this, it would be important to examine and tease out the relationships between the quality of the finished product and the quality of the research therein, and how these both relate to the costs borne by new models.

- g. It was felt that professional or subject associations may be able to play a greater role in publishing monographs as they already foster a strong culture of volunteerism, but that some of the desirable features of new models may require skills (such as copy editing) that are not easily found within the academy.
- h. On barriers, it was felt that any transition to new or open-access monograph models would be slower than to open-access journals due to the 'chunked' nature of the latter – journals can be published open-access at the article level.
- i. Also on barriers, it was noted that many publishers pay peer reviewers for monographs, but not for journals, and that this practice would either need to change or form a part of any new model.
- j. The role of green open access for monographs was also raised, and there is a question around what this role could be that may potentially be worth exploring.

Item 4: Initial thoughts on research requirements

- 14. The Chair noted that, while identifying specific and precise research requirements would require further work, the four research areas identified in the paper were an important starting point and could be expanded to take account of the points made during the discussion above, with the addition of a fifth area that explores the desirable features of any new model and the current barriers to innovation.
- 15. It was agreed that smaller groups of the ERG would meet to discuss the parameters of each of these research areas with the aim of reaching a more precise specification, and to report back to the next meeting of the ERG.

Actions

- **All:** Discuss the project within networks to gather any further thoughts.
- **BJ and GC:** Identify smaller groups and arrange meetings to discuss research projects in more detail.
- **BJ:** Circulate a note of the meeting.
- **BJ:** Set up the HEFCE web-page and Twitter presence for this project.