

Book or journal?

The scholar's choice and the scholar's dilemma

Authors considering how to present their research findings have four primary considerations: what format best suits their material, what audience they hope to reach, what audience they need to impress, and what publisher they should select. Most scholars have firm opinions relating to the first three points but extremely vague ideas about publishing. It is crystal clear to editors and publishers that while publication is crucial to the career of a scholar, most know very little about the publishing process, and fewer still keep abreast of current developments in academic publishing.

Paul H. Kratoska

Scholarly publishing on Asia in 2009

There are approximately 1,000 university presses worldwide, including roughly 100 in the United States, 50 in Europe, more than 200 in East Asia and 35 in Southeast Asia. In 2007 North American publishers produced slightly more than 275,000 books and university presses accounted for just over 5 per cent of this total (15,802 new titles and editions).¹ China also has 100 university presses and they publish nearly the same number of new titles annually, although with a higher proportion of textbooks.

In North America the largest university presses publish between 200 and 250 titles annually and the norm is around 80, but these figures overstate the opportunities for scholars to publish research materials. Many university presses have turned away from specialised monographs in favour of academic books with wider appeal, particularly those that might be assigned as course texts. They also publish a considerable number of 'trade' titles, books on local flora and fauna, on hiking trails and surfing, on cookery, and other topics expected to sell in sufficient numbers to keep the publisher solvent.

In Asia, NUS Press in Singapore and Hong Kong University Press are the only English-language university presses that publish on the region as a whole and distribute internationally. The Ateneo de Manila University, the University of the Philippines and the University of Sto Tomas publish books in English but almost exclusively on the Philippines, and for distribution in the Philippines. Research institutes (such as the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore) also publish books and journals as do commercial academic publishers, with the latter particularly important in Japan, Indonesia and South Asia.

What does the state of academic publishing mean for a researcher trying to decide what sort of manuscript to write and where to submit it?

Publishing books

The competition to get an academic book accepted for publication is intense. One North American university press receives around 1,300 submissions annually but publishes just 70 new

Wiki - 739 words
Journal article - 6,791 words

Book - 87,304 words

Postcard home - 53 words

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Many university presses have turned away from specialised monographs in favour of academic books with wider appeal, particularly those that might be assigned as course texts.

titles, an acceptance rate of slightly more than 5 per cent. For scholars in Asian studies, opportunities are even more limited. While 83 university presses in North America publish books on US history, just 26 declare an interest in Asian studies.² The editor handling Asian submissions at another North American press received 'well over' 2,000 offers in 2008 and published 25 titles (a success rate of around 1 per cent).

These are daunting odds, and they mean that some very good pieces of research will probably not get into print. There are, however, ways to improve the chances of success.

First, authors should select a publisher that handles exactly the sort of material they have written, and send a preliminary enquiry that states clearly and succinctly what the manuscript accomplishes. Since a submission will stand a better chance of being accepted if it complements an existing strength in a publisher's list, this point should be emphasised.

Second, because a monograph dealing with specialised material is more difficult to publish than a book that caters to a wide audience, authors should broaden the appeal of their manuscripts. A study of the garment industry in Cambodia will attract a smaller readership than a study of the textile industry in Southeast Asia that uses Cambodia as a case study and explains the involvement of Chinese firms, even if both studies present the same material.

Third, university presses with glamorous names are deluged with proposals and manuscripts. Authors should be realistic in assessing whether there is any prospect of having a manuscript accepted, and certainly should not waste time sending a publisher material that is too specialised or falls outside the purview of the press.

Fourth, few publishers will even look at unrevised PhD theses, and if a revised dissertation retains features that betray its origins, it will stand little chance of receiving serious consideration.

Edited collections are very much out of favour with university presses, and not just because they are viewed (rightly or wrongly) as publications that are not rigorously refereed, and therefore count for little in promotion exercises. The reason is simply that they do not sell. The problem first arose with conference proceedings and *festschriften*, both of which generally included material on diverse subjects and of varying quality, and university presses abandoned both genres long ago. They continued to publish edited volumes if the focus was tight and the subject compelling, but e-reserve and course-pacs have undercut the market for these books as well, and today may university presses evince very little interest in an edited volume.

Getting an academic book published will almost certainly become even more difficult as economic weakness forces universities to make budget reductions, with adverse consequences for libraries and university presses.

For Asian studies a strong case can be made for edited volumes because the wide range of languages and cultures in the region make it impossible to deal with many topics except through collaborative research, and such books still find a market in Asia. For example, NUS Press has had a good response to two edited volumes that discuss Southeast Asian conflict zones, Aceh in Indonesia and Pattani in southern Thailand, and no single author could have written the material that went into these books. Research projects in East Asia often draw together experts from different fields to consider a common topic, as in a recent edited volume, in which specialists discuss banking, foreign investment, industrial development and the rural economy in Myanmar.³

Getting an academic book published will almost certainly become even more difficult as economic weakness forces universities to make budget reductions, with adverse consequences for libraries and university presses. Even before the economic downturn, universities expected academic staff in the social sciences and humanities to publish books in order to demonstrate the strength of their scholarship and depended on university presses to produce these books, but they rarely provided the level of financial support the presses need.

Publishing articles

The alternative to writing a book is submitting material to scholarly journals, and opportunities for publication of articles have increased significantly over the past decade owing to a proliferation of journals. In the 1990s academic presses had little interest in new journals. The market was saturated and library budgets were such that purchasing a new journal almost certainly required cancelling an existing subscription. The growth of electronic journals and bundling – the marketing of packages of journals – changed all of that. In 2001, I read an article entitled ‘The Academic Journal: Has it a Future?’⁴ So rapid and so comprehensive was the advance of journals that just five years later, in 2006, the editor of the *American Historical Review* suggested that journal articles were displacing scholarly monographs as teaching tools and as the primary vehicle for academic discussions.⁵ Electronic publication slashed production costs and, because a digital journal does not occupy shelf space, reduced the cost of maintaining a collection of journals. Moreover, online searches allow scholars to locate articles in a much wider range of publications than was possible 20 or 30 years ago.

It is impossible to offer any meaningful estimate of the number of academic journals being published, although the figure is certainly very large. Project MUSE (part of Johns Hopkins University Press), which distributes electronic versions of journals issued by smaller academic publishers, offers 396 titles. Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press publish well over 400 journals between them. Taylor & Francis produces more than 1,100 titles, and Elsevier more than 2,300 titles. Learned societies, professional associations and university presses collectively publish around 9,250 peer-reviewed journals, and the Thomson Reuters Web of Science, which includes the Arts and Humanities and the Social Sciences Citation Indexes, lists more than 9,000 international and regional journals and book series.⁶

Specialised material is easier to publish in a journal article than in book form because digital production and electronic distribution have led to publication of increasingly specialised journals. Where scholarly journals once handled a broad spectrum of material (*The Journal of Asian Studies*, *The Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* and *Modern Asian Studies*, for example, all publish material that deals with many countries and draws on several disciplines), newer journals often adopt a narrower focus and target a specialised audience. Journals often restrict the length of articles to 8,000 words and they rarely accept anything longer than 10,000 words, so the format limits a writer’s ability to present complex material or extensive documentation.

On the other hand, electronic journals are beginning to realise the potential of digital production by including materials that could not be handled in a print journal, such as colour illustrations, original documents, large maps with fine detail that must be enlarged to be read, audio and video clips, and live links to material referenced in citations.

Worldwide electronic distribution notwithstanding, journals retain distinctive identities and serve what has been termed ‘discourse communities’, groups that share sets of assumptions and goals, and carry on extended conversations through the journal. Outsiders can find it difficult to gain entry to these communities, and may be told the reason is that the content or mechanics of their work fails to satisfy scholarly standards. The standards are generally presented as universal, but a great many academic journals are produced in North America or the United Kingdom, and their standards are those prevailing in the English-speaking world. Conventions in Continental Europe and in Asia differ in important ways, as do some of the topics studied, and the mode of presentation.

The dilemma

University administrators have yet to adjust their criteria for promotion and tenure to take into account the new realities of publication, and rapid movements in publishing make it likely that those realities will continue to change. In the humanities and social sciences a book remains the standard for promotion and tenure. Publication in international refereed print journals is valued but is not deemed an adequate foundation for an academic career, while electronic publication is viewed with suspicion, and the large number of new journals makes it difficult to assess the weight to be given to journal articles. The number of manuscripts being written has far outstripped the capacity of the market to absorb new monographs, and falling sales have made the business model that once sustained university presses unworkable. Leading publishers have called on university administrations to re-think the criteria they use for promotion and tenure, saying that university presses can no longer provide the benchmarks. Such a reassessment clearly must happen, but anyone writing up research material in 2009 faces a dilemma. Although academic publishing is perforce entering a new world, old realities still prevail within the university.

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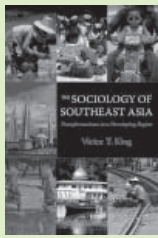
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