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.

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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 (13,802 new titles and editions). China also has 100 university press 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.

Scholarly publishing on Asia in 2009

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 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. 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.
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, Acer in Indonesia and Pattani in southern Thailand, and no single author could have written the material that went into these books. Reports from both of these cases show that editors, often drawn together from a wide range of resources, are the key to publishing in this area. Edited collections are a mainstay of small presses, where both lack of resources and the limited market for monographs make it impossible to offer any meaningful estimate of the number of academic book titles being published.

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 unviable. 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 performing a new world, old realities still prevail within the university.

Sources