Do We Need the UP? A New Model for Scholarly Publishing in History

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Do We Need the UP? A New Model for Scholarly Publishing in History

Posted on April 1, 2002 by Editor

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.01. INTRODUCTION (Return to Index)

In the age of the pen and paper, scholars often had amanuenses to write for them and copyists to publish their work. In the age of print, scholars usually wrote for themselves but always relied on printers to publish their work. We are now at another turning point in the history of scholarly communications in the humanities, for scholars now have the ability to publish their work without the aid of publishers as they are presently understood. The convergence of three trends has made this revolution possible: the growth of new kinds of academic communities of interest on the internet, the increasing inefficiencies of academic print publishers, and the emergence of new computer-aided publishing tools.

.02. THE “LIST”: NEW FORMS OF COLLABORATION IN ACADEMIC HISTORY (Return to Index)

Collaboration has long been recognized as a vital element of scholarship. Collaboration allows researchers to share knowledge, to benefit from differing points of view, and enjoy the fellowship of like-minded people. For these reasons, academic culture has developed (or rather inherited and refigured) a number of institutions whose basic purpose is to foster collective work. The history department and the professional society are the two most widespread and important. Neither, it must be said, has been very successful in fulfilling its collaborative mission. The department serves primarily as a forum to discuss and process administrative affairs common to
its members — teaching, hiring, advancement, salary issues, etc. It is rarely the case that the
department becomes a locus for collaborative discussion of historical research (despite the best
efforts of many department chairs!). The big professional society — like the AHA — is somewhat
more successful in fostering collaboration, particularly in its role as conference organizer. Yet the
most important function of the AHA in the lives of most historians is also administrative — the
announcement of jobs and the organization of interviews at the annual conference. The panels
are something of a sideline to the job fair and, more generally, meeting and greeting colleagues.

Recently, however, a new and more effective form of collaboration has developed on the internet
— the email discussion list. Ten years ago, there were no such lists in history; now their are
hundreds. They cover every imaginable period and theme. Some are very small, with no more
than a dozen recipients; and others are very large, with thousands. Some are professional in that
they control both membership (“closed” lists) and discussion (“moderated” lists); and others are
truly democratic in that they have open enrollment (“open” lists) and allow participants to post
anything they like.

Whatever their character, history lists have transformed the way historians work together. Before
the list, collaboration was problematic: scholars with like interests were difficult to find; they were
almost always in some distant location; and they could not be communicated with efficiently. The
best an historian could hope for was a conference in which historians physically gathered to mull
over a narrow topic. And conferences are rare because they are difficult to organize and
expensive. The list has changed all that. With an internet search engine or a directory of lists, any
historian can find a group of scholars with similar research specialties. If one doesn’t exist for,
say, the history of women in ancient Egypt, any computer-literate historian with a modern email
program capable of producing lists of recipients can create one. Once the list is located or
formed, nearly all the participants are always “there,” that is, capable of participating in the
discussion. No need to travel anywhere. And communicating with the group is as easy as
sending an email, and as inexpensive. Given the efficiencies and economies involved, it is little
wonder that email discussion lists have blossomed in history.

In a sociological sense, the email list has significant implications for the core collaborative
institutions in academic history. On the one hand, the email list will augment the activities of the
history department and professional society. Relationships that are made “on-line” will be carried
over into departmental seminars and panels at annual meetings. On the other hand, the email
discussion list may well (and I would argue already is) taking over the collaborative functions of
the department and society, which in turn are becoming increasingly administrative bodies. Allow
me to give an example. In 1998, the “Early Slavic Studies Association,” meeting in Seattle,
resolved to create an email discussion list. The “Early Slavic Studies List” (ESSL) began with
about 40 names of scholars who studied Slavic history, languages, and literature in the period
before 1725 (the year Peter the Great died). Gradually, word spread over the internet. A year
after its inception, the ESSL had out grown the ESSA. The ESSA has several dozen paying
members (almost all American), puts out a short newsletter twice a year and meets for about
two hours each year to discuss official business. The ESSL has well over 200 member from all
over the world, is constantly in session and is focused on the “content” of Slavic studies. In short, early Slavic scholars now belong to two mutually beneficial organizations; one occasional and administrative (the ESSA) and one continual and collaborative (the ESSL).[1]

.03. THE “GOOD” PRESS: OUR MISPLACED TRUST IN THE UP (Return to Index)

Despite their growing importance, the email discussion lists have been confined to a limited role in the overall scheme of scholarly communication. They operate like continuous seminars, allowing scholars to do the business of research with nearly all their colleagues nearly all the time. Yet I would argue that the lists — and the more traditional professional organizations that often stand behind them — are poised to enter the market in scholarly publishing in history. To understand why, we must begin by investigating the institution that currently has this market cornered — the academic press or, for short, the UP.

The UP is an unusual kind of monopolist, for they do not dominate or even attempt to dominate their nominal business — making, printing, and distributing academic books. Rather, they control the “upper segment” of the market by monopolizing (or being allowed to monopolize) prestige — an object of obsessive, fetishistic desire among most professional historians. Historians, who are otherwise very intelligent folks, seem to be perfectly willing to judge historical books by their covers. They have created a hierarchy of presses, from the most prestigious (Oxford and such) to the least prestigious (subsidy presses and such). A UP’s place in this ranking is not determined by the quality of books they produce (or any other measure of quality), but rather by the status of the institution that lends it its name. Oxford is prestigious, therefore so is OUP; Southern Illinois University is not, therefore its press is not. All this empty status-seeking may seem rather mindless. And it is, particularly among a group of people who are paid to think critically for a living. But it is far from insignificant. For with this habit of unthinking pretentiousness, academic history has made UPs the gatekeepers to advancement in the discipline. Aspiring associate professors know that they would be well advised to publish with UP — the more prestigious the better — if they want to secure tenure. Publishing with Edwin Mellen (even if your book is path breaking, exhaustively researched, etc.) usually “just won’t do.” Better to go with a “good” press. Thus the editors of UPs — people often without training in the historical field and always without official sanction to evaluate historical work — will decide who will become your colleague and who won’t. And they will do it largely on the basis of profitability.

As odd as that may seem, there is something even more bizarre about the relationship between the UP and academic history. Despite the incredible trust historians seem to have in UPs, they do not do a very good job at their primary mission — publishing scholarly books. I learned this while publishing my first book. In 1994, having received my Ph.D. in history, I set out to find a tenure track job. Given that one in two Ph.D.s in history never finds a position, I knew the odds were against me. My mentors informed me of the hard truth: in order to get a job, I needed a book. And not just any book, but one from a “good” publisher. So I wrote a monograph and sent a letter proposing the book to a whole slew of “good” academic publishers in 1998. All but one rejected my proposal. The one interested press sent my book to be vetted. After a number of
months I received the reviews. I had a good idea who the reviewers were (it’s a very small field). Happily, both recommended publication with minor amendment. It would have been difficult for them to say anything else, because the reviewers knew I had to publish this book to advance in the field. I revised the book and it was accepted. And then I waited. My book — beautifully produced I must say — was finally published in 2001. It cost nearly 50 dollars.[2]

What do good publishers do? They produce quality books in a timely fashion at reasonable prices and distribute them widely. UPs often do not do any of these things. Increasingly, they will only publish books that have the prospect of being profitable, meaning that important books in relatively obscure fields never see the light of day (at least at UPs, and it’s easy to imagine what happens to the careers of the authors of books that remain unpublished or are printed at “second tier” presses). Their publishing process is glacial, meaning that would-be associate professors might have to approach a tenure committee with a contract instead of a book (which, of course, can be fatal). They often charge large sums for small books, ensuring that the audience will be small (in fact, they are usually confined to research libraries, which in essence subsidize the bad habits of UPs). And, finally, their mode of distribution is, in the age of the internet, astoundingly primitive. Paradoxically, despite these evident failings, historians have shown little inclination to seek alternatives to the UP.

.04. POWER TO THE PEOPLE: A NEW MODEL FOR SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING (Return to Index)

Interestingly, the UPs themselves are seeking alternatives, though very slowly. They understand that their way of doing business does not have much of a future. Eventually, if their inefficient practices continue, there will come a time when historians and other academic authors realize that the emperor has no clothes, that they no longer need the UP to publish good books in a timely fashion at reasonable prices. I came to this conclusion quite recently while seeking a publisher for a second book (which I had completed while waiting for my first to be published). I sent letters to several UPs, but each said the monograph was too narrow to be profitable. I considered going further "down the list," when I had a revelation. I had job security, so why did I need the UP if prestige is all that it could offer? Perhaps there were other, better alternatives. I then decided to see if I could produce and publish my book more efficiently than the UP.

This is what I did. I had the book vetted by colleagues of mine in the field and made the appropriate revisions. I edited the book carefully and imposed on friends to check it for typos and such. I formatted the electronic file like a book (with an attractive cover, table of contents, running headers, index, etc.). I then produced the “final” electronic version of the book using Adobe Acrobat. (It’s not really “final,” because — unlike a printed book — it can always be corrected at a later date). Now that I had the book the way I wanted it, I need to publish it. This was easy, for I knew all most the entire audience for the book — the 225 members of the “Early Slavic Studies List.” I posted a message to the list announcing the book and inviting people to download it from a web site. They did. I then sent the book (as an email attachment) for review to about 25 prominent history journals. Finally, I arranged to have the book stored and
catalogued in Harvard College Library’s digital collection. They will create a bibliographic record that will then be represented on national and international library databases, like Worldcat. The entire process — vetting, editing, formatting, advertising, publication, reviewing, and cataloguing — took about a month of part time work. And the product is available everywhere all the time instantaneously for free.[3]

I am not suggesting that historians publish their own books, though my experience demonstrates that using available technologies they can do so far more effectively than any UP. Rather, what I would propose is an alliance between the historian, the history email list cum scholarly society, and the UP. The arrangement might work as follows.

The historian would, as always, research and write the book. Evaluation, however, would be taken out of the hands of the UP and placed in the hands of the history email list cum scholastic organization. Preliminary versions of books could be posted on a field-specific web site, a “pre-print service” as it are called in the hard sciences. Members of the list could then comment on the book by email or postings on the site. Particular scholars might be selected by the list to anonymously evaluate the book on-line. After a time, the book would be removed from the site and the author would be asked to revise it in accordance with the suggestions. Once this was accomplished, the list cum organization would publish the book under its own imprint on the web. A printing services company (of which there are dozens on the internet) could be contracted to produce print copies on demand for those who wanted them. Throughout this process, the author would retain all rights to the book. This means that he or she would have the option of printing the book with a UP (or any other publisher). And it is easy to understand why UPs would want enter at this stage in production and not earlier, for the list will have done a lot of the expensive publishing work for them. The list solicited the book, vetted it, formatted it, and published it. Most importantly, the list test-marketed the book for the UP. The UP need only analyze the rate at which books are downloaded or printed on demand to determine if there is a larger “public” market for the book. If the numbers look good, the UP signs a contract with the author and “goes wide” (as they say in the film industry) with the book, printing an elegant paper version and distributing it to thousands of book stores around the globe.

The results of such a reformation in scholarly publishing would be immediate and tangible. History books would be evaluated by large groups of professional historians, instead of accountants working with two historians. Monographs would be sanctioned by scholarly organizations interested in the quality of research alone, rather than by UPs with conflicted interests. All quality monographs would be published, rather then those which might make a profit for UPs. Books would be distributed on the internet at a very low cost, rather then by print publishers at very high costs. Finally, those books with proven commercial potential could be published in elaborate editions by UPs, so that the non-professional readership might profit from the books. It’s a brave new world. We have only to enter it.

.05. NOTES (Return to Index)
[1] For information on joining the ESSA and ESSL, contact the author at <mpoe@fas.harvard.edu>.


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9 THOUGHTS ON “DO WE NEED THE UP? A NEW MODEL FOR SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING IN HISTORY”

King Simmon
on January 30, 2014 at 6:12 PM said:

Hi there, I discovered your web site via Google whilst searching for a similar subject, your site got here up, it appears good. I have bookmarked it in my google bookmarks.

köp hampaprotein
on February 3, 2014 at 3:24 PM said:

Tips to support a strong body and a healthy world

nursing compression stockings
on February 4, 2014 at 2:56 AM said:

So support stockings during maternity, will most likely really support you in the maternity weeks
Fina tatueringsmotiv
on February 4, 2014 at 11:30 AM said:

of the Course of Supervision on the College or university of St Andrews, said he had spoken for you to 15 managers involved in selecting staff about their reaction to be able to meeting candidates with visible tattoos.

kallpressad kokosfett hälsoegenskaper
on February 4, 2014 at 12:51 PM said:

The unsaturated fat in the skin color will be a major target for the getting older and carcinogenic impact of ultraviolet light, though not really necessarily the only one.

proteiner
on February 4, 2014 at 4:25 PM said:

In addition, hemp seeds contains vitamins such as C, E, B1, B2, and carotene, that happen to be in the fat soluble digestible form and trace minerals such as phosphorous, calcium, potassium and magnesium.

hampaprotein
on February 4, 2014 at 5:05 PM said:

Having seen people miraculously heal from all kinds of dis-ease through non-invasive methods, the woman’s passion today is truly for you to help people become aware of what it really takes to be healthy.
By the way, this fatty acid ratio is alleged to be ideal in promoting health and decreasing swelling within the body.

great blog you have got here... it