

OPEN

Introduction: The Academic Book of the Future

Rebecca E. Lyons and Samantha J. Rayner

Lyons, Rebecca E. and Samantha J. Rayner (eds).
The Academic Book of the Future. Basingstoke: Palgrave
Macmillan, 2016. DOI: 10.1057/9781137595775.0004.



In early 2014, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) partnered with The British Library to launch a call for teams to run The Academic Book of the Future Project. The Project brief was ‘to explore the future of the academic book in the context of Open Access publishing and the digital revolution.’¹ Our team² successfully pitched to facilitate a two-pronged approach. We are using the expert services of the Research Information Network and Dr Michael Jubb to undertake a wide-ranging series of focus groups, gathering responses to our research questions,³ whilst the core Project team are consulting with the communities of practice connected to academic books to evoke responses via more detailed pieces of commissioned research, symposia, workshops and conferences. The mid-point of the Project, Academic Book Week (9–16 November, 2015),⁴ will highlight a week-long showcase of this activity, plus other special events from our partners, including the launch of the volume you are now reading.

Books matter. They contain knowledge, and knowledge, as the saying goes, is power. Over the centuries, control of the production of texts has been (and in some places still is) manipulated by governments, by religious groups and by those who fought (and those who are still fighting) for their wider, more openly accessible distribution. Books *are* matter: they are containers, crucibles, confrontations. They can teach, guide, inspire, soothe, and agitate. They can exist physically or digitally. Trying to define what a book is, or could be, is a challenging task: it exists in so many different guises, and is always finding new ways to reinvent itself. Our Project seeks rather to try and curate a map of these many guises, underlining the strength in the diversity of choice available to the author, whilst highlighting the challenges of production, distribution, use and preservation that these choices bring.

Academic books, at least in the UK, have a currency as part of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which measures the quality of academic research. There is, therefore, a pressure to understand the map of academic publishing in its entirety. Given that scholarly communication operates on a global stage, with different countries having different (or no) national assessment systems, and that books (physical or digital) circulate in ways that are difficult to track, the Project team acknowledges that as cartographers, the most impact they can have on that map is to log and analyse some key landscape features. Engaging with so many different agents in the academic book circuit has enabled us to appreciate their widespread willingness

to collaborate and their curiosity to learn from what others have done or experienced.

The small volume that you hold in your hands or are reading on a screen therefore represents a mighty amount of energy and commitment to the academic book – to all academic books, in their past, present and future states. The contributors have worked together with the teams at Palgrave and the AHRC/British Library Academic Book of the Future Project to produce a witness to the extraordinary – and relevant – set of talents and experiences, ideas and reflections that connect people who inhabit the communities of practice that form the contexts of the academic book.

This publication

An initial conversation with Palgrave Macmillan in March 2015 resulted in the challenge to create a Palgrave Pivot for Academic Book Week. The original suggestion – to create a book in a week – was modified to an attempt to go from commissioning to production to distribution in a rapid time frame: a Palgrave Pivot.⁵ Contributors were shortlisted from across the Project's four main stakeholder areas: publishing, libraries, academia and bookselling. A proposal was submitted by the Project team to Palgrave, and was sent off for review. The authors were approached and chapters commissioned in late July 2015. The proposal reviews came back just before first chapter drafts were due to be submitted, and in late August 2015 all of the authors submitted their chapters. Review and editing were undertaken by Rebecca Lyons, Samantha Rayner and Palgrave's Jen McCall, and with a turnaround of roughly one week, the chapters were back with their authors for amendments. The existence of this book owes a great deal to the unfailing dedication of each of the 13 contributors, who worked to extremely tight deadlines to expedite the crucial commissioning, editing and review stages.

It is fitting that this volume begins with the perspective of a book historian: no foray into the future should ignore the contexts of the past. Dr Tom Mole, Reader in English Literature and Director of the Centre for the History of the Book at the University of Edinburgh, suggests that whatever shapes or formats books might take in the future, their most important role will continue to be their 'transformative contributions to knowledge' (p. 16). Whilst digital technology affords new

possibilities in terms of research and dissemination, it might also have drawbacks in terms of readers' engagement with, and comprehension of, the text. Mole reminds us of the usefulness of the printed codex, and the 'need to ensure that the most valuable qualities of the academic book as printed codex migrate to the new media environment without being devalued' (p. 16).

The next chapter moves from the past into an imagined future. In his satirical dystopia, Michael Pidd, Digital Director for HRI Digital at the University of Sheffield, describes a future in which books are wearable: smart lenses that project data onto the back of our eyelids, networked chips embedded into our hands to 'summon sheets of interactive v-paper', and Data Projection Gloves (p. 19). In this iteration of the future, the academic book has reached optimum levels of media-embedded, holistic, user-friendly interactivity. But the biggest innovation of all is the concept of 'Linked Ideas'. Books, articles and other research outputs have lost all their old distinction, because ideas on a topic can automatically be 'located, retrieved and assembled' from amongst 'all written discourse' (p. 10). 'Like' and 'dislike' indicators and a 'comment' facility are used for the peer-review process, and the need to submit books for assessment is obsolete. But does this vision of the future satisfy?

Dr Sarah Barrow, Head of the School of Film and Media at the University of Lincoln, moves the academic section towards an examination of the challenging issues of Practice as Research, and considers the academic book of the future in terms of research that does not conform to purely textual outputs. Barrow argues against the prioritisation or fetishisation of text over other forms of research output, and seeks to eliminate the walls between theory and practice, pointing to the video essay as a potential format that enables such work. There is a need, she argues, to 'trust in alternative ways of doing and presenting research' – the academic book of the future should be allowed to be 'other' (p. 25). But, she goes on to highlight, changes in policy and evaluation exercises will be required to enable and facilitate such otherness.

The needs of academics have shifted, but publishing and its processes and products have also changed. Developments such as print on demand – as well as huge shifts in digital affordances – have offered publishers new freedoms, such as in the format and platforms for ebooks and other digital content, and the ability to publish titles in smaller print runs for lower costs. This has coincided with changes in the way that academics research and write their books. In their chapter, Jenny McCall, Global

Head of Humanities, and Amy Bourke-Waite, Senior Communications Manager, at Palgrave Macmillan discuss the Palgrave Pivot format, and the motivation behind its development within these contexts.

The function of the academic book will be just as important as its form, argues Dr Frances Pinter, CEO of Manchester University Press and Founder of Knowledge Unlatched. The ‘scaffolding’ (p. 40) around academic books, including business models, supply chains, metadata and digital tools, will require special attention. In the evolution of the academic book, it will be ‘knowledge infrastructures’ (p. 40) that are key: the ‘ecology of people, practices, technologies, institutions, material objects and their relationships within each discipline.’⁶ Interdisciplinarity will increase as digital affordances not only provide answers to old questions, but also encourage new questions to be asked. Delivery and discovery systems for ebooks will have to improve. And publishers, she says, will have to move with the times.

Anthony Cond, the Managing Director of Liverpool University Press, highlights the inextricable links between the university press (UP) and academia. A UP reports to its university library, senior university managers or quasi-university committees: it is ‘a mirror to the budgetary, utility and reputational concerns of the subjects and institution it serves’ (p. 47). But Cond is fairly confident about the place of UPs in new and emerging landscapes and contexts. Open Access and digital materials seem an inevitable part of the academic book of the future, but Cond holds that the ‘esteem of the university press brand and the rigour of university press peer review’ (p. 50) will be crucial – perhaps more so than ever. The academic book may have several possible futures, but, Cond says, the need for ‘credentialisation’ (p. 43) will remain a constant.

The close relationship between national libraries, researchers and academic books has not altered in its essence despite huge contextual changes, such as digital developments, says Maja Maricevic, Head of Higher Education at The British Library. However, researchers’ ‘reading and information seeking behaviours’ (p. 59) have shifted, with Google becoming the most-used research channel. In such contexts, national libraries will be pivotal for their preservation role, with researcher access being provided through other channels. National libraries will also become increasingly useful for their role in preserving digital collections outside of scholarly publishing: non-academic ebooks, online newspapers, growing audio and video collections, web archives and digitised heritage collections. Going forward, Maricevic suggests, a stronger

relationship between funders, policy-makers and other national libraries will be a key aspect of The British Library's role, as well as a willingness to experiment with new ways of working – this Project being a key example of this kind of initiative.

Neil Smyth, Senior Librarian of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Nottingham, also considers the possible strategic issues and opportunities surrounding the academic book of the future – with regard to university libraries. The expansion in book format options from physical to digital; the changing roles of academics and librarians, and the consequently shifting relationships between the two groups; and the importance of academic books to the REF and university funding all have massive implications for the role of university libraries. How, asks Smyth, will academic books be organised and accessed in the future, if they are not in libraries? What conversations should take place between academics and librarians around academic books? What is the place of libraries in processes such as the REF? And finally, how can libraries best support the academic authors of the future: the students?

Kate Price, Associate Director (Collections & Research Support) at King's College London, broadens the focus to consider the academic book beyond the academy. As agents of cultural change, the reach of academic books is wide, transforming knowledge and perceptions (consider Darwin, for example), and influencing cultural attitudes as their content and ideas disseminate. Price considers the social and technological barriers to accessing academic books; the potential volatility of digital content (issues with archiving social media, for instance), and the role that libraries might play in these issues in the future. Price calls libraries agents of cultural continuity, providing access to current and past thought, as well as the threads of reasoning linking the two, and examines the implications in an Open Access future where the academic book is entirely 'de-coupled from the concept of the library collection' (p. 78).

Jaki Hawker, Academic Manager of Blackwell's Edinburgh, views the future of the academic book in terms of demand and supply. 'For me,' Hawker states, 'the bottom line in considering the academic book of the future is not "What does it look like?" but "Does it sell?"' (p. 89). The consumer will shape the academic book of the future, which will be 'inclusive, collaborative, available across multiple platforms and in a number of formats' (p. 90). Given innovations such as Open Access, print on demand and learning platform development, it seems that the

academic book of the future has infinite possibilities. And maybe it does. But Hawker argues that they will be ‘created, enabled and shaped by the market’ (p. 90).

Peter Lake, Group Business Development Director of the John Smith Group, focuses on a particular type of academic book: the undergraduate textbook. Traditionally the staple for academic publishers, this type of academic book is in decline in the face of major sea-changes in the ways that universities deliver their courses, and the ways in which publishers are catering for them. Universities often now create their own materials – materials that increasingly replace textbooks – including Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), online lectures and other digital resources. Publishers are creating new solutions too, blending ‘traditional textbook content with adaptive learning technologies, embedded testing and assessment features, integrated assignment functionality, personal study wallets and records, and collaborative learning tools’ (p. 94). ‘So,’ Lake asks, ‘if the university bookseller is going to be selling fewer textbooks, what will its role be in the future?’ (p. 94). The bookseller of the future may very well assist in the discovery of resources ‘from multiple providers and in multiple formats’ (p. 95); create and maintain digital content platforms; and take an active part in analytics and evaluation services.

Craig Dadds, the University Bookshop Manager at Canterbury Christ Church University, considers the campus bookshop and its relationship with the people and contexts in which academic books are written and used. For Dadds, the campus bookshop is key to the cultural life of the university, the student and staff experience, and the options and opportunities available to those within the university system. He is supported by a survey, undertaken at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU), of one hundred academics. When asked ‘What are the benefits of an academic bookshop on campus?’, responses cited the importance of the academic bookshop as a bridge between academia and the wider public, with open talks, book signings and other events playing a key role. CCCU’s academics named the bookshop as a pivotal location for locating niche and specialist information with the support of knowledgeable staff. The bookshop is also an important symbol of ‘academic rigour and learning’ (p. 100) to those embedded within its contexts, as well as those without. In this chapter the bookshop emerges as a key player in the world of academic books, aiding not just in their dissemination, but assisting in their creation and reach into the wider world beyond academia.

A launch pad for further conversations

The practice-based research process of creating this Palgrave Pivot has not only resulted in an output with an integrity that the uncompromised review procedures protected, but it has innovated in several different ways: the spread of authors across very different areas; the speed with which they composed and submitted their chapters; the work flows; and even the cover – which was chosen by a public vote. But the greatest innovation of this publication – what really makes it unique – is the conversations that have been and will be created around it. Read them individually, and the chapters in this volume are interesting, thought-provoking, insightful. Put them together, and suddenly new angles emerge: contexts shift, horizons broaden.

This volume serves as a launch pad for future conversations to take place. These will help to generate responses that will feed into and shape the second half of the Project's life, and they will also help to shape the wider conversations taking place around the academic book in broader areas, such as policy and government.

Professor Geoffrey Crossick ended his report *Monographs and Open Access* by remarking how impressed he had been by the willingness of the arts, humanities, and social science communities to engage with him, and urging: 'It is important that this engagement continues, because there is much to be gained by working with the grain, and much to be lost by not doing so.'⁷ This Palgrave Pivot provides tangible proof (in hard copy and Open Access formats, and in the paratexts that have been created and collected around its production) that engagement is continuing via the AHRC/British Library Academic Book of the Future Project, and beyond. The future of the academic book is collaboration. The future of the academic book is in your hands.

Notes

- 1 See <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/funding/opportunities/current/academicbookofthefuture/> (accessed 6 September 2015).
- 2 The Project team consists of Dr Samantha Rayner (Principal Investigator, Centre for Publishing, UCL), Nick Canty (Co-Investigator, Centre for Publishing, UCL), Professor Marilyn Deegan (Co-Investigator, Department of Digital Humanities, King's College, London), Simon Tanner (Co-Investigator,

Department of Digital Humanities, King's College, London) and Rebecca Lyons (Research Associate, UCL).

- 3 See <http://academicbookfuture.org/about-the-project/> (accessed 6 September 2015).
- 4 See <http://acbookweek.com/> (accessed 6 September 2015).
- 5 See Jenny McCall and Amy Bourke-Waite, 'The Academic Book of the Future and the Need to Break Boundaries', Chapter 4 in this volume.
- 6 Christine Borgman (2015) *Big Data, Little Data, No Data* (Boston: MIT Press), p. 33.
- 7 G. Crossick (2014) *Monographs and Open Access: A Report to HEFCE*, http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/indirreports/2015/Monographs,and,open,access/2014_monographs.pdf, accessed 20 August 2015, p. 70.



Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/version4>