

Jean Kempf (Université Lumière-Lyon 2 - Université de Lyon)
Jean.Kempf@univ-lyon2.fr

The Future of the Book. The Academic Monograph Revisited¹

Abstract

Since the inception of the social sciences in the latter part of the 19th century the book (as long form vs short form, ie articles) has been their central form of scholarly communication. Digital tools, by changing the way research is produced, disseminated, and measured, reinforce the new productivist ideology in research and university management in Europe (which had remained relatively immune to it until the 1980s) threatening the academic monograph first. Writing books, however, remains a central step in critical thinking in the humanities and the social sciences (HSS), and defines the very place of those sciences in the public sphere. This article discusses the causes of the crisis, and offers a theoretical perspective as to how the digital form may save the monograph form, if rightly used to rethink academic publication in the context of the “new” university.

Foreword

The following article outlines ideas that I am currently developing both operationally as a publisher (within OAPEN <http://www.oapen.net/>) and as a researcher. Much of the ideas presented here result from a personal interpretation of a field I have practised first as an academic and then as a publisher for more than 25 years. The intellectual world that shaped my thoughts about the world and nurtured me for all of my professional life, and that I see as absolutely fundamental for the survival of our species, is threatened, often through its own complacency and mistakes. And yet, as I argue at the end of the article, there is hope in a renewed practice of our scholarly endeavors provided we stick to our professional ethos, always seeking higher standards and always submitting all statements to the most stringent criticism, in other words provided we remain Mertonians.²

Jean Kempf is professor of American Studies at the Université Lumière-Lyon 2, and the director of the Lyon University Press.

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper read at the conference: “Rethinking the university after Bologna: New concepts and practices beyond tradition and the market”, held at UCSIA, Antwerp University on December 12th–13th 2008.

² In *The Normative Structure of Science* (1942), Robert K. Merton defined the terms of good scientific research often referred to through the acronym CUDOS (communism, universalism, disinterestedness, organized skepticism). See Robert Merton, *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973) .

The “future of the book” has been one of the central topics in the information world since the advent (or promise) of powerful digital technologies in the late 1980s/early 1990s.³ Much of what was written on the subject bears on the act of reading and tried to fathom the epistemological consequences of digital forms (accessible at the time only via the computer/tv screen in the form of a long scroll) and of electronic libraries. The actual scene twenty years later is much different and at the same time much more radical than what had been envisaged. As very often when new technologies appear, older ones continue to exist but become specialized and dedicated to the function they serve best, while benefitting from the technological improvements of the other technologies. Time also taught us something only young converts could have forgotten, ie that human practices are multifarious and that of course one should speak of books (in the plural) as so many different uses. In this article I will not take afresh this discussion but rather focus on one very specific type of book, the academic book or research monograph (as opposed to the academic textbook, the academic synthesis, etc.), and will shift the perspective from the book itself to the (academic) institution for although research books today are not always produced by a research institution they are all but in very few cases written by authors attached to an institution, ie deriving their legitimacy and revenue from this institution.⁴

I will first argue that the book as form (as intellectual object) is indispensable to our very life in society. And from this angle I see great dangers looming ahead, nay, already there. What technologies did not do, politics might very well achieve and not for the greater benefit of the community. The world of the Enlightenment, and before it of the great intellectual endeavours of the Antiquity and the Middle Ages, is threatened unless we know how to position the university at the center of society, creative knowledge at the center of society, and the book at the center of the university.

Why the (academic) book?

³ Among many others, Sven Birkets in *Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994) sees the end of book and the need to shift publishing to digital. See also John B. Thompson, “Introduction” (especially 1-8) *Books in the Digital Age. The Transformation of Academic and Higher Education Book Publishing in Britain and The United States* (London: Polity, 2005).

⁴ The sociology of authors, however, vary from country to country as it is connected with the possibility of employment. The journalist as intellectual, and the independent researcher still exist in the US while it is a rarity in Europe.

Since its inception in the late 19th century, the modern university has been a great provider of books, most of all in the Human and social sciences (henceforth referred to as HSS). The book both as *form and process* — I'll come back to this definition a little further down — is central to much of what the university does, to what is called “academic practice”. This state of affairs might be coming to a close as the academic monograph comes under attack from quarters which have nothing to do with digital media. Books read by a few hundred readers are now deemed too costly to produce (whether in print or otherwise). In the publishing world, one frequently hears comments about the fact that scholars cannot write *real* books, and one does not count the accusations of academic culture being “bookish”, an adjective which today means musty and out-of-touch with the *real* world. The repeated use of such an absolute adjective as “real”, however, should warn us as to the very relativity of the idea. But most important—and potentially deadly—is the advent of the productivist economy in universities since at least the 1980s (with national variations).⁵ For in book writing, time is of the essence and this fundamental wealth — or fuel — of academic work is now running short as the university is entering the productivist stage. Funding determines the content of the activity; new accountability procedures, the system of work by objective inherited from finalized research and engineering have contaminated academia throughout the western world deeply modifying the nature of academic work: research has had to adapt itself to this new environment, leading to all sorts of dangerous evolutions, the worst of all in HSS being the shift away from longer, time-consuming, risky pieces (typically books) and an intolerable pressure put on publishers who have been transformed into gate-keepers of—and not simply gateways to—promotion and support.

And yet HSS need books. By academic book, I mean obviously an *object* which has its own structure and dynamics, and which, as objects, defines a type of relationship between the reader and the data which is peculiar and shapes our way of thinking.⁶ A book is certainly not—or should not be—a mere accumulation of paper in folio form placed between two covers. This, however, is often the unfortunate result of the publish/perish mandate which has led to the production of those “paper objects” as

⁵ I prefer a simpler and older economic description of this evolution (“productivism”) to the commonly used managerial economy which I see as a *consequence* of the former. On this well documented evolution of the university see Lindsay Waters, *Enemies of Promise: Publishing, Perishing, and the Eclipse of Scholarship* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004).

⁶ See Adrian Jones, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

they should more rightly be called, in the hope of capitalizing on their symbolic value. This phenomenon is taking place even among respected publishers who far from anticipating what is to come (and supporting those researchers who do so) often publish more of the same as soon as a vein has proven to have some sort of following. In recent academia one cannot even count the number of conference proceedings, collected pieces, circumstantial publications published for reasons ranging from the need to fulfill production objectives in public contracts (“you said you would make a book so you will” or “we gave you money for a book, so do a book”), political pressure, emotional blackmail or sympathy (“can we really block this colleague’s career by not publishing his dissertation?”). At the basis of such behavior, is the fact that the actual content is often deemed less important than the very existence of an object testifying that something really is happening in the university and that academics don’t get paid just to lie around.

Productivism requires quick and simple quantification and thus relies on itemization (number of published pieces or pages), or even better on automated forms of “evaluations”. The most sophisticated form being the now (in)famous impact and H factors which pursue the utopia of ascribing value to scientific production outside individual qualitative judgement.⁷ These are exclusively based on an extension of the popularity system used by social networks, just like the Google algorithm, ascribing value to quotation, and eventually relying on the reputation of the journal (or its publisher) and thus work best with small coherent focused items – thus disqualifying books. Eventually what fascinates those engaged in the search for new and always better means of “evaluating» publications is that it could be automated and thus would not need actual reading. For the pursued result is not academic (knowledge) but managerial (the allocation of rare goods), thus *ranking*, a rather absurd concept in research.

If I spent some time on the criticism of evaluation procedures that are now invading all European universities after having been mostly invented in Thatcherian Britain in

⁷ I am only concerned here with one of the aspect of the impact factor. For a broader discussion see for instance Benoît Godin, “On the Origins of Bibliometrics” working paper n°33 written for the Project on the History and Sociology of S&T statistics (2003), Canadian Science and Innovation Indicators Consortium, Montreal (available at http://www.csiic.ca/PDF/Godin_33.pdf); Richard Monastersky, “The Number That’s Devouring Science”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 14, 2005) <http://chronicle.com/free/v52/i08/08a01201.htm>; Peter Lawrence, “The Mismeasurement of Science”, *Current Biology*, vol. 17, n° 15 (2007): 583-585; Peter Lawrence, “Lost in publication: how measurement harms science”, *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics*, 8 (2008); Anne-Wil Harzing and N. Adler, “When Knowledge Wins: Transcending the sense and nonsense of academic rankings,” *The Academy of Management Learning & Education*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2009)..

the 1980s,⁸ it is because they are the most serious threat to the book as we conceive and need it.

Books are first and foremost a *process*. They are argued statements of a temporary stabilized state of research. This stable moment is necessary to allow other discourses to develop, not simply in the short- and medium- term, but also in the long and even very-long term (which often is the real time frame in HSS).⁹ In HSS, such a statement cannot be made short for epistemological reasons. First of all the general demonstration (frame) cannot be separated from the construction of the facts. Rhetoric is not packaging, it is the form (in Hjelmslevian terms) of the research itself. Conversely, much of what HSS research is about is designing new paradigms, refreshing interpretations, not elaborating new “facts”. The contribution of a HSS book is often only half in the new facts and findings it presents, the other half being the paradigm it develops by *reorganizing* existing data. The actual work is often based on the (minute) commentary of other texts and in their reformulation, a process which cannot fully take place in the short space of the article, and even less in the very short format of the modern (productivist) conference where the speaker is routinely granted 20mins to carry out a point to his audience. If poster sessions are not adequate it is not that HSS scholars love speech and lack concision. It is because, epistemologically, each given questioning needs to reinvent its framework, and such framework although building on other research (visible in footnotes and bibliographies) is to some extent original to the researcher. For HSS books are *worlds* the reader needs to enter (by reading) and to interact with (by criticising and writing about them). This is why in HSS an academic often writes only one book in his career (meaning develops only one great concept or idea), even though it might take him/her various books to state his/her point and explore all its facets and implications.

But one of the strongest reason HSS need books is because they have a social function. Our books deal with the very fabric of societies and their capacity to think

⁸ And not coming from the United States as it is often wrongly thought. American universities not working on any centralized system of funding are in fact submitted to a much less stringent system of review, although there are serious process of individual review and tenure has become a rather elusive goal for many American scholars especially in the HSS.

⁹ Of course, it is also the result of an elaboration which has previously taken all the various *necessary* steps: first conference paper, then discussion piece, then refereed article, then more exchanges with colleagues and reviews, etc. before it gets to the publisher. The degree of pre-publication exchange, however, varies a great deal according to the disciplines.

about their future, and this complexity must be carried over (the word communicated would be far too simple) to the public.

Books thus defined are threatened in the university of the 20th-21st century. They may even be the first casualty of recent political choices. Since the 1980s, the invasion of academia by the managerial, technological model of “development” (understood here as in phrase «research and *development*” intensifying utilitarian training over its *educational* function) have led to a productivist framework of short consumption cycles and quick returns on investment.¹⁰ Even in HSS, research money is more and more often allocated to focussed studies, for limited periods of time (typically 2 or 3 years maximum), and assessment procedure cycles are rarely more than 4 years, leading to a well-known disease in politics, the “permanent campaign” syndrome. Research topics and programs are reduced in scope, more predictable roads are chosen over challenging but risky ones as quick results are expected and the heuristic value of failure is negated by a system which cultivates and only rewards success.¹¹ Books have a hard time surviving in such an environment, and those that do often either renounce some of the essence of what I defined above as a book, or proceed from political and bureaucratic motivations rather than from intellectual necessities. These adverse conditions have been made worse in times of contractions of positions by universities using “the book” as a criterium for hiring, thus *de facto* externalizing (to publishers) one of their most central function, choosing their personnel. The result has been threefold. First a homogeneity of analysis, and the slippery slope of fashion which leads to “more of the same”, the endless repetition of the same concepts on varying *corpora*, or the wearing thin of some tenuous ones. Opening any academic publisher’s catalogue is a (sobering?) lesson in mass production of (semi)-identical objects which not always put forth novel ideas but most often rehash the latest fashionable concepts in a name dropping operation, albeit sometimes a very competent and elegant one.

Second, the priority given to exposure (or “reputation”) more than on actual worth and solidity. This is probably one of the softest and most insidious results, and thus is difficult to prove “scientifically”. Power circles, however, are undoubtedly decisive in many careers and in decision to publish, both in the small and prestigious

¹⁰ See in particular Lindsay Waters, *op.cit.*

¹¹ This does not taking into account the time spent in collecting funds and accounting for their spending which supersedes that of actual research, as well as the growing amount of time taken by other tasks related to the running of programs and departments, in other words a shift towards administration and service over actual production.

publishing houses. This leads to the third consequence which is the external pressures put on (academic) publishers, making them decide on criteria which are often warped, and certainly have more to do with the author's (or publisher's) need to publish than with the intrinsic contribution of the book.

Of course things are never as clear cut and simple as this rough typology makes it to look like, and numerous counter examples exist. But academic publication—whether public or private, profit or non-profit—in practice is far from the irenic (and pure) image it gives of itself when it describes its wonderfully pure oiled system of editorial choice and especially when it invokes the mantra of “peer review” and editorial boards. My aim here is not to discuss peer review as such, but anyone who has ever done any peer reviewing knows its huge structural flaws and obvious limits.¹² I simply want to point out at the obvious (and “human”) limits of decision making processes in academic publishing, and thus at its highly political nature, before suggesting means to improve it to make it more serviceable to science, which is defined not like politics by finalized aims but by method and debate, contradiction and creative destruction.

What can we do about it?

First we must realize that the solution is largely in the hands of universities as they are primarily responsible (as employers and owners of presses) for the creation of the environment of high level scientific publishing. Universities should urgently develop a **new ecology of the book**. This means several things, and first that institutions should encourage the production of books that matter (ie books that take the long view and bring a real contribution to research) by identifying their potential authors and helping them accordingly.

Such change would of course involve making promotion decisions on other assessment factors (which, granted, are more difficult to handle than metrics or nepotism), as well as new assessment models and criteria for research financing. But most radical, it would require a challenging of the dogma that university teachers have to write books in order to get hired or justify their salaries. Teaching, at least at undergraduate level, remains a primary function of the university and concerns a huge number of positions and person-hours, and can very well be separated from

¹² On peer review, see the recent Report of the British Academy, *Peer Review: The Challenges for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (September 2007) available at <http://www.britac.ac.uk/reports/peer-review/index.cfm>. Also read the excellent empirical study by Michèle Lamont, *How Professors Think. Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgement* (Harvard University Press, 2009). See also her extensive bibliography.

actual research production despite endless statement of the contrary. The university would gain better pedagogues and educators, and research might not be the poorer for it, as much “constrained” research is of poor quality and does not really enhance teaching either. Concretely this would mean giving time to academics to research deeper and broader and write those books that matter. Last, and paradoxically, circulation must be slowed down (which means invent completely new “managing” cycles) and output (of books at least) should be limited. Some 15 years ago, I read in the *Times Educational Supplement* a wonderful piece by an English professor (unfortunately I lost track of the reference . . .) who suggested to use in academia the same methods as in the highly criticised common agricultural policy, ie paying academics so they should NOT write. Self limitation will work if reward is not based purely on (book) publication.

Something, however, which must not be limited but *increased* is the activity at the heart of the academic experience: **disputation**. Thus research time and means must be re-allocated to the **community of debate** which is as important for advancement of science and for education as the actual writing of books. New technologies allow it at an unprecedented level, and thus should be harnessed to that mission.

The solution to the crisis I described above, however, can only be partly technical, but it is inseparable from it as historians of the book, from Robert Darnton to Roger Chartier, have shown.¹³ And digital media takes many forms. It may simply extend older paradigms as with the digital distribution of books conceived in the print world (typically in the form of .pdf files). In this case the book remains a classical object with a few new (albeit not negligible) functions, such as greater accessibility and quotability, but hampered by certain constraints such as reading and handling modes adapted to the folio and here transposed to another type of environment. This explains the reason why e-books are not really successful, at least not in the field of monographs. Until electronic paper becomes commonplace I have very strong doubts that an ergonomics developed in one environment will function in another, and even then it will need to integrate storing, annotating facilities as well as direct (non keyboard) interfaces working seamlessly. But .pdf also allow the print-on-demand

¹³ See Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopedia, 1775-1800* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979); Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors and Librarians in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993).

system which only solves the question of availability of the book (in time and place) yet leaves the book pretty much within the same phenomenological environment.¹⁴ The future will probably see a mix of forms complementing each other. But digital media also leads to new paradigms, meaning a radical evolution of the writing and publishing chain. Truly digital books are hybrid objects including (or rather connecting) the primary literature as well as comments and secondary additions to the text itself. It thus constitutes a whole intellectual world in itself, a network (or web) of complex dialectics. Furthermore, although the “core statement” formerly known as “the text” is and must remain fixed after its publication (for intellectual as well as legal reasons) its meaning can be altered by direct comments or additions, making it into both a center and/or a node in a whole open-ended research process. As it follows the very process according to which researchers work, but in an individual way, there is great potential in such a largely untried form, as the digital form would potentially enhance cooperation in the continuous process of elaboration of scientific statements. This would also preserve the importance of the printed text (print, as print-on-demand or as traditional print version) if only for ergonomic reasons, while making it only one of the possible avatars, or versions, of *the* text. But as it clearly separates content and form, digital media modifies the context and nature of writing.¹⁵ Its epistemological effects can be summed up as follows, each of the four effects having a positive and a negative side.¹⁶

First digital media changes the nature of access to texts. Texts used to be accessed in three ways only: through direct contact by the reader (a contact which could be either organized/systematic or haphazard), through bibliographical description (and various limited searches based on it), and through the reading of other texts (notes, commentaries, etc.). Now access is both to full text and metadata through search algorithms that are invisible and not accessible to the researcher.¹⁷

¹⁴ There remains the issue durability and conservation of such PoD books. Literature on the topic is rare, virtually non-existent as the problem is rarely spoken of and most information comes from printers themselves.

¹⁵ As historians of reading have shown, the difference between content and form, and the importance of the form is paramount in the effect of texts (what they produce socially). See for instance Chartier, *The Order of Readers*.

¹⁶ In this paper I will not consider two otherwise important issues a) the reading interfaces, as we deal with a plurality of access, a process already present when we work with index cards, xerox copies, etc, AND books; b) long-term preservation which is to be considered with digital media in a completely new way as the physical storage, the code and the machines to read the code have to be preserved, or ways found to upgrade the code regularly.

¹⁷ Metadata can be roughly compared to bibliographical information such as title, author, date of publication, subject, ISBN, dimensions of the book, number of pages, language of the text, etc. But it

Readers' access is thus greatly enhanced but at the same time undergoes new—and sometimes invisible—constraints that must be included in the research protocol. As digital media separates content from form, the control and the status of the author (as well as of the publisher) is greatly reduced. Thus the question of “integrity” of content (which was partially settled by laws on copyright and *droit d’auteur*), and more generally of accountability of scholarly statements (formalized in the late 19th c.) need to be looked at in a fresh way.¹⁸ The “remix” effect, however, while it weakens authorship also fosters creativity, an important value even in scholarly production.¹⁹ Digital media encourages a rhetoric of the fragment, and conceptual bricolage already heavily at work in North American critical theory, which explains why digital media (albeit not digital publishing) was quickly at home in the American academic community. It befitted the *epistémè*, or was even produced by it.²⁰

This *métissage* encourages new discoveries and insights through new connections but at the same time leads to dangerous intellectual patterns. Digital media speeds up the circulation of ideas, but may as a consequence emphasize access over appreciation, or rather reaction over action. I do plead for debate and collaboration in the HSS, especially in the humanities which had abandoned this sense of *disputatio* to the realm of media, but the speeding up of exchanges may not be completely satisfactory in recreating thought over opinion. By blurring the lines between publication and edition²¹, digital media can easily encourage all forms of weakening of the principles

can also be much more complex and describe the very content of the text (chapters, figures, even paragraphs) in a very fine way, thus allowing complex search operations on the content of the text itself. These search operations are conducted through series of predefined commands that allow the machines to retrieve and order information. The most famous search algorithms today are Google algorithms (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google_algorithm or <http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/PageRank>).

¹⁸ The print media had found ways to establish accountability through the recognition of authorship for historical, political and economic reasons. The “droit d’auteur” (different from copyright) is at the same time a protection of the producer of the content and the sign of his accountability.

¹⁹ On the remix effect, see Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).

²⁰ What is known as “French Theory” but is more American (US) than French. See François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Co. transformed the intellectual life of the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. [Paris, 2003]). The reason why digital publishing has not caught on in the US as much as elsewhere is due to resistance factors on the part of the powerful publishing industry and not to epistemological issues in the academic community itself.

²¹ The distinction I make between publication and edition is simple yet fundamental. Publication simply means making public. It's everything once it leaves the privacy of the home/office/computer. It has no implication on selection and quality control. Edition means selection. This is what publishers do as their French name indicates better (*Editeurs*). In the age of internet and cheap digital print-on-demand when anybody can make public (publish) anything, their role is not simply — not even essentially — to make things public (lots of other people can do that) but to choose, edit manuscripts into books/articles, and allow it to reach its audience. This is a very different act from publishing which is centered on the author and resembles a sort of bottle thrown into the sea. To put it even

of research, while encouraging new innovative forms of rendering. The greatest danger of this acceleration for the HSS, however, comes from the favoring of the article over the book, as it is simultaneously fostered by the productivist ideology. Lastly, and in the form of a creative paradox, I would suggest that although digital media seems to favor quantitative methods of assessing importance/relevance of a given work, by making them much easier to implement (metrics²²), digital media is also an opportunity to invent new (and one would hope complementary and why not better) ways of assessing content for quality.

A roadmap towards the book of the future?

In 1999, Robert Darnton, the book historian, formulated the following model (or hypothesis) for the future of the book:

Instead of bloating the electronic book, I think it possible to structure it in layers arranged like a pyramid. The top layer could be a concise account of the subject, available perhaps in paperback. The next layer could contain expanded versions of different aspects of the argument, not arranged sequentially as in a narrative, but rather as self-contained units that feed into the topmost story. The third layer could be composed of documentation, possibly of different kinds, each set off by interpretative essays. A fourth layer might be theoretical or historiographical, with selections from previous scholarship and discussions of them. A fifth layer could be pedagogic, consisting of suggestions for classroom discussion and a model syllabus. And a sixth layer could contain readers' reports, exchanges between the author and the editor, and letters from readers, who could provide a growing corpus of commentary as the book made its way through different groups of readers." (Robert Darnton, "The New Age of the Book," *The New York Review of Books*, March 18, 1999.

<http://www.nybooks.com/nyrev/index.html>²³

Even 10 years down the road, I find the proposal difficult to supersede, first because it is intellectually compelling in that Darnton proposes a *transitional* form which *builds upon* the tradition of the book to go beyond it, and second because there is hardly any way of knowing how we can go further until the model has been *experimented*.

differently, the publisher is a "producer", in the same sense as a movie producer: one who allows artists/researchers to realize their creation/research, who chooses content, finds the practical means to realize them and manage to communicate them to the audience.

²² Recent debates on metrics, its reliability and significance have shown (if need be) that no measurement is value-free. See for instance Peter Lawrence, "The Politics of Publication", *Nature*, 422 (Mar. 2003): 259-261, or *Citation Statistics*. A report from the International Mathematical Union (IMU) in cooperation with the International Council of Industrial and Applied Mathematics (ICIAM) and the Institute of Mathematical Statistics (IMS), June 2008 (available at <http://www.mathunion.org/fileadmin/IMU/Report/CitationStatistics.pdf>)

²³ See also Thompson, *Books in the Digital Age*.

Theoretical models and philosophical speculation will not suffice. The history of technology and communication is full of those mistakes. We need (real life) experiments, by publishers and authors. Some experiments are currently under way but most of them are conducted on journals and most are technological in the sense that they aim at developing a platform rather than intellectual objects.²⁴ The real challenge of digital media is e-science, in other words, what digital media can do to content, and little has been done in that field as yet.²⁵

The reasons for the absence of real development of Darnton's model are not simply technical (lack of bandwidth, storage capacity, reading tools, etc.). They are first and foremost linked to the way publishing in the book age is organized. Digital book publishing is costly in manpower and resources if it is conceived in a centralized and industrial mode. Such problem calls for new decentralized means of production as was the case with the collaborative software development.²⁶ But even such a revolution may not even lead to a solution. The most serious problem with Darnton's model is that, for the 5th and 6th layers to exist, a minimal critical communal mass has to aggregate.²⁷ And although communities capable of producing a fair amount of information and even "knowledge" are formed almost spontaneously everyday

²⁴ Among the very innovative and challenging projects which specifically aim at inventing new intellectual objects through technical platforms is the French example of *Sens public* (<http://www.sens-public.org/>). Among the major experiments in digital books the oldest one is probably Gutenberg-e (<http://www.gutenberg-e.org/>) developed by Columbia University Press and the American Historical Association, now discontinued and holding 35 titles in Open access. One can also note: in the US the National Academies Press (<http://www.nap.edu/>), in Canada Athabasca University Press (<http://www.aupress.ca/>), in Australia Australian National University Press (<http://epress.anu.edu.au/>), in South Africa Human Sciences Research Council (<http://www.hsrcpress.ac.za/>) and in Europe the launching of Open Humanities Press (<http://openhumanitiespress.org/>), of Bloomsbury Academic Press (<http://www.bloomsburyacademic.com/>), and of OAPEN (<http://www.oapen.net/>, see next note) whose members already publish digitally some of their titles from their own sites. One should also mention the University of Michigan Press which formed Digitalculturebooks (<http://www.digitalculture.org/index.html>) both a publishing project and a research project on electronic publishing (Thanks to Jean-Claude Guédon for his help on the identification of those projects).

²⁵ OAPEN is a project which aims at bridging that gap and at reinventing the field of the digital HSS monograph. It is run by 7 university presses in Europe and supported by the EC in the E-Content Plus program, and is developing a sustainable model of making and publishing *books* in the Humanities and social sciences, combining open access digital version(s) and print-on-demand. The project is based on the double premise that peer-review and editing are indispensable stages in academic book publishing, but also that digital media transforms/enhances content in a previously impossible way, making the circulation of knowledge better in quality and richer in content. See <http://www.oapen.net/>.

²⁶ See Jean-Claude Guédon, "Between Excellence and Quality: The European Research Area in Search of Itself," in *Rethinking The University After Bologna. New Concepts and Practices beyond Tradition and the Market* (UCSIA, Antwerp: 2009).

²⁷ One sees it in the attempt by commercial publishers to build such communities via blogs for instance.

(through social networking), the only communities capable of delivering a *certified critical mass* at a large level are universities as well as learned societies for narrower fields.²⁸ Universities are thus the only one to be able to implement in any systematic way the multi-layer book system envisaged by Darnton *at a sustainable economic and human cost*. This is why commercial publishers can only propose a “technologically hyped” version of the old printed book, which, even if delivered on hand-held readers, will not convince academics that they have reached a new level of science through digital media.

The above analysis is crucial to understanding the present choices facing the academic community. Given that publishing is central not simply to careers (and rewards) but first and foremost to the very construction of science and that digital media can truly enhance that potential (and as well save academic publishing from the only sanction the market can deliver, ie profitability), academic communities do not have any other choice than re-empowering themselves through a re-invention of university presses as non-profit publishers and academic “service”.²⁹ I would go as far as suggesting that the publisher is the new center in University life (and politics). At least it is one of its most strategic cores. It used to be the library because of its physical holdings. But with networking and dematerialization much of that function is now shared by other players. In the future, although the “information service / library” will remain strategic, it will share this role with the publisher. **The new center of the university of tomorrow may well be the publisher**; it should certainly be a renewed, reinvented, rejuvenated community of knowledge and research around the fundamental values of books, of **books as worlds**.

²⁸ This point is more contentious (and complicated) than I make it to be. Collaborative work may prove a real opening in research, extending the network of participants to a given research beyond the limits of academia and mixing professional researchers and non professional ones (amateurs in other words, or just simple citizens). This is already taking place in journalism, and Wikipedia is often quoted as a real intellectual success and breakthrough despite its limitations. Also, citizens need to be more and more associated to scientific work. But when it comes to original / fundamental research (as opposed to encyclopedic work or news gathering and analysis) the complexity of the issues involved most certainly reduce the perimeter of actors to specialized arenas (the universities/research institutions), functioning with their own specific rules and tempo — which is one more reason why the managerial ideology which may be well suited to certain sectors of the economy — becomes counterproductive when applied to universities.

²⁹ I use the word service here in a specific etymological way: by service I mean which serves the community. And selection, editing, peer review serve the community best. Thus a true press as academic/university service would not be a press committed to printing/publishing all the material the community produces or wants to publish. It should have an editorial independence within a system of community service which would be comparable to the judicial system.