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Scholarly Books

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Scholarly Books

Sarah Jones

History

As an academic's career progresses, there are many landmarks: teaching that first class, completing the dissertation, publishing the first article, getting a tenure-track position, publishing that first book, and receiving the first promotion, among others. Tracking a scholar's progress often apears to be linear and cumulative. Charles Bazerman and his colleagues point out that "publication of a scholarly book is frequently a central part of the evidence offered in support of tenure and promotion cases."[1] In fact, a brief review of tenure and promotion requirements for three prominent communication studies departments—University of Iowa,[2] the University of Nebraska-Lincoln,[3] and the University of Pittsburgh[4]—reflects that a peer-reviewed, published work is expected to be in the candidate's

1 Charles Bazerman, David Blakesley, Mike Palmquist, and David Russell, "Open Access Book Publishing in Writing Studies: A Case Study," *First Monday* 13, no 1 (2008). http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2088/1920.

2 "Operations Manual, Department of Communication Studies," University of Iowa, January 2000, http://www.clas.uiowa.edu/_includes/documents/faculty/criteria_communication.pdf

3 "The College of Arts and Sciences Handbook," University of Nebraska-Lincoln, January 2008, http://ascweb.unl.edu/adminresources/bylaws.pdf

4 "Criteria and Procedures for Appointment, Reappointment, Promotion, and Conferral of Tenure," School of Arts and Sciences, University of Pittsburgh, April 16, 2003, http://www.as.pitt.edu/faculty/governance/tenure.html#A

research dossier. At Iowa and Nebraska, scholarly books are specifically mentioned. As metrics of scholarly authority, university-press books are supposed to reflect prestige, rigor, and accomplishment. What makes the scholarly book a hotbed of discussion about authority in academe is the recent increase in the digital publication of books. As the costs of print publication continue to rise and the numbers of books acquired by libraries and individual users have decreased, the expectation of having your own book when the tenure and promotion committee is waiting, persists.[5] This tension has made the digital publication of a scholarly book tempting to many researchers.

In addressing the Sixth Scholarly Communication Symposium at Georgetown University Library, Professor Stephen Nichols of Johns Hopkins University, explains that many in the academic community believe that peer-review processes are only possible for print publications, so digital scholarship is belittled and younger scholars are discouraged from pursuing such avenues.[6] This perception of digitally published scholarship—including books—reduces the legitimacy of an online book as a metric of scholarly authority according to members of the academic community. This point is important to remember as we consider books as metrics of authority. The digitization of information is happening; it is now a question of the extent to which academic information will go digital and the correlation of that shift to academic perceptions of print and digital books as scholarly metrics. While many scholarly authority metrics such as the h-index, the journal impact factor, and Web of Science citation patterns seek to quantify objectively the research output of academics, it is my contention that scholarly books as metrics of authority may tell us more about the individuals applying that metric than the scholar being considered. As Michael Jensen points out, "technology doesn't drive change as much as our cultural response to technology does."[7]

Strengths and Weaknesses of Books as Metrics of Scholarly Authority

With print publication of books, Jensen explains that publishers use peer re-

5 Bazerman, Blakesley, Palmquist, and Russell, "Open Access."

6 Joan Cheverie, Jennifer Boettcher, and John Buschman, "Digital Scholarship in the University Tenure and Promotion Process: A Report on the Sixth Scholarly Communication Symposium at Georgetown University Library," *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* (2009): 220.

7 Michael Jensen, "The New Metrics of Scholarly Authority," *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* June 15, 2007, http://chronicle.com/article/The-New-Metrics-of-Scholarly/5449.

viewers to validate research and conduct studies to determine the marketability of a book.[8] If the financial bottom-line for a book does not cover publication costs and it has not gained support through subvention, then the project is scrapped. Rather than eliminating a scholarly project from the publication queue based on the innovativeness of the scholarship, this decision is made based on what is essentially a popular vote. Thus, the final variable being measured by the print version of this metric may not be authority (although, we hope that passing peer-review would indicate that), but instead popularity. This determination points to marketability as a measure of perceived relevance to an audience. The analyses of a scholarly book's marketability and potential popularity are not always on point however. In his discussion of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's institutional repository, Dr Paul Royster describes such a situation. Royster explains that Drs Scott Gardner and Armand Maggenti spent ten years researching and writing The Dictionary of Invertebrate Zoology.[9] This 970-page volume with over 13,000 entries had been accepted for publication by the University of California press, but when the final draft was to be submitted in 2004, the publisher cancelled a number of its life-sciences contracts, including this one. A year later when Royster introduced Gardner to the digital commons, they agreed to post the volume in the repository. Within a year of digitization, this book had more than 12,000 downloads and continues to be one of the repository's most popular works.[10] While this book had been cancelled by the publishing company—most likely because the publisher did not expect it to meet that financial bottom line—the persistent high volume of downloads points toward a clear exigence for the text.

Admittedly, the institutional repository is not the same publishing medium as the university press and given that most institutions expect book publication through a "respected publisher,"[11] print publications may offer academics seeking promotion a safe alternative to its maligned cousin: digital publication. There are a number of digital publication options that do not have any means of reviewing the material produced and have an 'anything-goes' attitude—contributing to the perception of digital publications as subordinate to print publication. However, not all digital publication outlets are so laissez-faire. Bazerman and his colleagues describe their work with the Writing Across the Curriculum Clearinghouse—a website dedicated to providing free, digital access to scholar-

8 Jensen, "New Metrics."

9 Paul Royster, "The Institutional Repository at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln: Its First Year of Operations," Faculty Publications, UNL Libraries (2006): 2.

10 Royster, "The Institutional Repository," 3.

11 Jensen, "New Metrics."

ship. Through this site, the authors published a digital anthology that underwent peer-review, was edited by prominent scholars, contained unique essays, and reflected professional copy-editing.[12] Their case study provides the following insights about digital publishing: many researchers are ready and willing to publish digitally; the digital format can support the peer-review process and stringent editing criteria; digital publication leads to faster and wider distribution; digital books are cited sooner and more often than their print cousins; and "free electronic distribution is an attractive method of supporting a free and open exchange of scholarly information."[13] This site demonstrates that while there are digital publishers who eschew peer-review, this does not mean that all digital scholarship follow the "open gate" model.

As with print publications, digital publications using similar evaluative methods for publishing material rely on peer-review. This peer-review process is intended to provide authors with insightful pertinent feedback to extend their work and readers with ideas that have been viewed through a number of academic minds. What marks digital publication apart is the elimination of market research concerned with covering publication costs. For online publication, relevance can be derived post-publication on an individual level. The production of digital scholarship is not entirely free, however. There are editors and reviewers who may offer their services for free, but digital books also need copy-editors that require financing.[14] As there are a number of organizations that provide research grants and the content would be free to all, libraries may be persuaded to invest in supporting digital publications instead of commercial publications.

Judgment of Books as Scholarly Metrics

Thus far, this essay has addressed the shifting landscape in the publication of scholarly books from purely print to digital format. Through peer-review, both formats rely on the presumption that that process is determinative of research as valid and respectable. The print publication process also makes its decision to publish based on potential popularity and revenue. As pointed out in the previous section, digital publication of scholarly books has the potential for almost identical use of the peer-review process and with open-access offers unique benefits for dissemination. What makes the case of digital versus print publication

12 Bazerman, Blakesley, Palmquist, and Russell, "Open Access."

13 Bazerman, Blakesley, Palmquist, and Russell, "Open Access."

14 Bazerman, Blakesley, Palmquist, and Russell, "Open Access."

of books unique, I argue, is that these texts act not simply (or even primarily) as metrics of authority, but as metrics of the academic community's interpretation of this technological development. Contrasting the two means of distribution, we can see that "in general commercial academic publishing industry defined readers as potential consumers and academic content as a commodity that could be sold, ideally on a steadily increasing subscription basis."[15]

As a metric, print book publications may address validity through the peer review process, but the perceptions of those applying the metric may also reflect a conceptualization of knowledge as a commodity and readers as consumers. Conversely, digital publications can be argued not only to increase the agency of the author who can now be more involved in that publication process, but also to shift the emphasis back to knowledge dissemination and development. For tenure and promotion committees, this means that if scholarly books are to be a metric of academic contribution and authority, then the committee should recognize that it is the content of the book that matters, rather than emphasizing where it was produced. Thus, as a metric of authority, books are in a position in which after surviving peer review, the receiving public (from tenure committee to first-year undergraduate student) can move beyond concerns over publisher and instead turn to considerations of creativity, the improvement of the human condition, and more nuanced understandings of ideas.[16]

Relevance for Communication Studies

Recognizing typical interpretations of print scholarly books as more valid and digital publications as inherently being the products of a laissez faire attitude—despite comparable review processes and a number of advantages—we can see that the scholarly book gets its status as a metric not necessarily from any strategic calculations, but from the community's perceptions. This relationship becomes particularly striking when we turn to sections of the mission statements

15 Michael Felczak, Richard Smith, and Roland Lorimer, "Online Publishing, Technical Representation, and the Politics of Code: The Case of CJC Online," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 33, no 2 (2008): 273.

16 Felczak, Smith, and Lorimer, "Online Publishing," 277.

of the Universities of Iowa,[17] Pittsburgh,[18] and Nebraska-Lincoln.[19] In their own ways, each mission statement elucidates the study of communication as related to the ways in which communication and interaction shape and are shaped by the institutions, experiences, and relationships we have. For individuals with a more traditional background and positive experiences with print publishers, that metric may be perceived as appropriate and valid. For others who perceive print publication as a commoditization of information that diminishes reader and author agency and produces an over-centralization of knowledge, digital publication may be perceived as more valid and appropriate. As a discipline, communication studies attends to the different factors and relationships that influence human action and interpretation. The different interpretations ascribed to print or digital publications become salient when we recognize the communicative interdependence of who is attempting to use the metric and the metric itself. Thus, the relationship between this discipline and book publication is not so much that books will provide a measure of scholarly authority for us, but that communication studies will illuminate the ways in which the scholarly book metric measures and reflects the assumptions of its user.

17 "Mission Statement," Department of Communication University of Iowa, http://www.uiowa.edu/commstud/graduate/mission.shtml.

18 "Mission Statement," Department of Communication University of Pittsburgh, http://www.comm.pitt.edu/about/index.html.

19 "Mission Statement," Department of Communication University of Nebraska-Lincoln, http://www.unl.edu/cs/.