

Letter from America

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Journal debates

The nature of academic publishing is changing rapidly and young humanities academics are struggling to find their place, writes **Toby Miller**.

I just spent a couple of days with (predominantly) junior faculty in Salt Lake City, the Mormon monument to faith that makes its money from skiing, mining and IT. A local owner of eight regional radio stations has decided that the state needs greater awareness of how history and new media blend, so he has endowed a biennial seminar. I was present for the second of these events.

Alongside the debates about work, fun, heritage, communication and pollution via the internet, I discerned considerable anxiety among the group - whose members came from all over the US but were almost all not yet tenured - about having their work recognised.

Some worked in contexts where a single-authored monograph, preferably with a major university press, was required for tenure. Others had been told that books were valueless, and they must produce journal articles, but only in certain kinds of journals (from within their disciplines, and produced and policed by professional associations). Many were advised that electronic-only journals, chapters in book collections, and work they did as editors (for example, guest editing special issues of journals) was worth nothing towards tenure.

The librarians at the seminar and I were alarmed by such developments. We tried to situate them for these young scholars within the wider political economy: whereas the top 100 or so US research libraries dedicated 3.6 per cent of their purchases to electronic resources in 1992-93, by 2004-05, the figure was 37.46 per cent - over \$US1 billion. And that redistributed money has nearly all come from the book budget, which is heading in one direction and one direction only - towards zero. This is happening, of course, when non-academic books are still coming out in huge numbers. The book is thriving.

What is the story with the academic fetish for journals and the lower esteem of the book? It derives, of course, from the dominance of science and medicine in research universities. Their denizens don't generally write monographs. But there are other elements, as well.

After World War II, several corporations recognised the potential monetary value of science and medical journals, due to the vast amount of freely available research and the growing demand for outlets. Both the supply and the price of academic journals boomed, starting in the mid-1970s. For decades, firms charged high prices for every scientific and medical journal.

By every measure devised, for-profit journals have lesser standing than not-for-profits. Impact studies indicate that the private sector goes for high-priced volume, the public for low-priced excellence. The former are created very quickly and easily - there are bounties for in-house editors who create or purchase them - whereas journals started by professional associations focus on quality over quantity.

And today, there is mounting anger at the prohibitive cost of these properties. The American Mathematical Society has run repeated surveys of prices, despite astonishing attempts by corporate publishers to prevent it doing so by court actions (undertaken right around the world). To protest the system, more and more

scientists are sending out research on the web in advance of publication. Perhaps most significantly, sections of the US federal government argue that since it pays for vast amounts of this research, the results should be publicly available *instanter et gratis* so that public money is not being used over and over again towards the same outcome, via scholarly salaries, then government grants, and, finally, library subscriptions.

Plus the scientists have struck back. In 2005, Cornell University's faculty senate called on its members to familiarise themselves with the pricing structures of key journals in their fields, and reject price-gouging corporations by refusing to publish with them or act as article reviewers.

In 2001, 34,000 scientists from 180 countries signed a petition calling for journal articles to be available gratis online within six months of their hard-copy appearance. The letter was orchestrated by the biomedical founders of the Public Library of Science (PLoS). Two years later, PLoS started as a not-for profit publisher, courtesy of millions of dollars in underwriting from liberal foundations. Its journals publish accepted material immediately through PubMedCentral.

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Perhaps half of open access journals are funded thanks to authors' payments, which may amount to as much as \$US1500 a page in certain science journals.

What are the implications for the young scholars in Utah, who were from the humanities and the social sciences? What should their tenure committees tell them? Those who want to write books or contribute chapters to collections, and have high-status outlets willing to publish their work, must be supported. Those who might have been expected to produce monographs in the past deserve some tolerance, because shrinking library budgets are having a significant impact on university presses. And those who are publishing in journals should be encouraged to do so via open-source, electronic versions.

Along the way, perhaps faculty who are scientists could propose that libraries allocate money from the science and medical journals budget towards databases, and protect the book budget!

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