

On Academic Publishing Some Questions and Answers

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What is your view toward publishing edited collections, and how if at all has this evolved in recent years?

Our enthusiasm for publishing edited volumes, which had cooled considerably, has been somewhat rekindled by the migration—both real and anticipated—of scholarship to the web. Whereas edited volumes have generally been viewed by scholars and librarians alike as less valuable than single-authored book-length works and have long been overlooked by book review editors, online availability of the chapters in a well-edited, well-conceived, and well-executed edited volume today in many ways liberates a given essay from the fetters of print.

That said, we generally avoid grab-bag volumes consisting of unedited or loosely edited conference proceedings, preferring projects that were originally conceptualized as books, *per se*. We also are taking a very hard look at projects consisting even in part of previously published articles, unless the project is specifically—very specifically and deliberately—tailored to a particular course and is organized with adoption as a text in mind.

How important is prospective course adoption for determining whether a manuscript is accepted for publication?

The answer to this question depends entirely on the nature of the manuscript. If the manuscript is intended as an original and research-based work of scholarship that will contribute substantively to the scholarly literature, the question is moot since OUP continues to publish many works of specialized scholarship that are highly unlikely ever to be used in courses. So, we would not look unfavorably on a manuscript that takes a novel or revisionist position and thus has the potential to transform our understanding of its subject simply because

we don't believe it will adopt. Far from it, in fact. While we of course strive to publish books that have the potential both to change our understanding of a subject or period *and* to garner significant adoptions (our recently published *Americanos* by John Chasteen is an example of such), we don't look to conflate our pedagogical publishing with our scholarly publishing (and in fact have a higher education publishing division entirely separate from our academic publishing arm). We are admittedly not displeased when the two dovetail, as they do with award-winning titles.

Under what if any conditions might you agree to review a manuscript that is also being sent for consideration by other publishers?

We regularly review manuscripts that are also being considered by other publishers and have no hard-and-fast policy in this respect. Individual editors may in certain instances request a period of exclusive review if they are particularly enthusiastic about a project and will then strive to accelerate our review process and bring it to an expeditious conclusion, but it is up to the author to decide whether or not to grant such exclusivity.

On the whole, we do not believe authors are well-served by limiting their options to a single press, unless they have a pre-existing relationship with that press, or with an editor at that press, or are especially eager to be published under the auspices of a given series, and/or have reason to believe the review process is likely to result in the offer of a contract. What no author wants, of course, is to spend months waiting for a review process to draw to a close, only to have the press's decision ultimately be not to publish, in which case the author must start from square one.

That said, scholars are, I believe, well-advised not to take a "carpetbombing" approach when submitting proposals since most publishers request, as does Oxford, that we be given the opportunity to complete our review process once it has been initiated before the author makes a final publishing decision. If you send your work to too many editors, you may be hamstrung in this regard, held up by a particularly slow review process at one press.

How do you make decisions about cloth or paperback release of your books?

Very much on an ad hoc basis. We view each new book according to the likely size of the readership (a calculation based on the subject, author, writing style, competing titles, etc.) and whether that readership consists primarily of institutional libraries, specialists in a given discipline or subdiscipline, students, or general readers.

There are also differences in convention between the disciplines in this regard. Works in media studies, for instance, or linguistics tend to be published more frequently in simultaneous cloth and paperback editions than do books in, say, history or politics.

Book type matters as well. In the life sciences, for instance, field guides almost always appear simultaneously whereas research monographs are almost always published in hardcover. Edited volumes sometimes appear in simultaneous editions (especially if they are targeting a classroom audience), whereas *Festschriften* publish in hardcover.

Most often we prefer to publish works of original research—whether specialized monographs or books geared toward a larger audience—first in hardcover and then selectively to publish paperback editions

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approximately 18-24 months subsequent to the original hardcover publication.

What is your approach to online availability?

“Online availability” can mean a great many things. To name just a few: publication of the final book as an ebook by the publisher; publication of the final book as an ebook by a commercial aggregator; publication of the final book in an online archive (whether Oxford’s own Oxford Scholarship Online or a multi-publisher aggregator such as Ebrary); the posting by an author of a PDF of the final book on her personal or departmental website; the posting by an author of a “gray matter” draft of the manuscript of the book before it has been edited by the press; inclusion in marketing programs such as Amazon’s Search Inside the Book which is intended to stimulate interest in the book and drive print sales; inclusion in Google’s Book Search program.

While Oxford discourages authors from posting unedited drafts of their work on their websites (and yet encourages them to selectively share such drafts with colleagues with an eye toward soliciting constructive criticism prior to publication), we actively participate in a number of programs intended to drive awareness and sales of our authors’ works, whether in print or digital form. We are in the early years of what will be a long transitional period in the history of scholarly communication and publishing, and we actively seek out and exploit opportunities via which we can creatively and proactively get the word out about our authors’ books.

In addition to working with other organizations to disseminate our books online, Oxford publishes a wide array of books and reference products online, including: the Oxford English Dictionary;

the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography; the African-American Studies Center Online; the Islamic Studies Center Online; Oxford Music Online; Oxford Art Online; our Digital Reference Shelf encyclopedias; and Oxford Scholarship Online, our award-winning archive of scholarly books.

And we’ve taken a particularly proactive approach with our journals publishing, experimenting widely with various open access models.

What are some of the key issues on the horizon that will affect the future directions of scholarly publication in our field?

The humanities are clearly in the early stages of a migration to a mixed-model publishing environment wherein the printed book will usefully interact with online versions of the same work. What this means for individual scholarly communities varies from discipline to discipline but the first dividing line is arguably between the sciences and the humanities. The sciences have already made great strides in converting to a digital environment, steps which remain yet to be taken in the humanities world for a number of reasons (e.g., sources of funding, the pace of research and the need to publish results quickly, the sciences’ reliance on journal publishing over book publishing, and the baseline orientation of humanists toward the book).

Just as I’m hard-pressed to imagine a humanities academy without books, I can also not imagine that the book’s format hegemony will hold for all that much longer. A decade ago, I would have argued that a key step in this evolution will be the acceptance by tenure committees of digital forms of scholarship that never see publication in print. However, with the changing economics of digital publishing

(i.e., the fact that publishers can now print single copies of a book on demand, much like we print documents from our desktops), I think this question of “print or digital” has become a red herring. Digital will not displace books in an environment where different formats exist side-by-side. Some new formats may squeeze out other new formats in the current Precambrian era we’re now in, but print will be with us for many decades yet to come. As long as authors have proud mothers and fathers who want to show off their progeny’s work, books will remain a staple.

In this environment, scholarly publishers will need continually to demonstrate the value they add to the scholarly communication ecosystem, and to make sure they are adjusting according to what the academic community requires of us.

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In closing, I’m always pleased to chat with scholars and librarians about any of the above issues and welcome questions and comments. My email address is niko.pfund@oup.com. ■