

# Academic Publishing Challenges and Opportunities

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To paraphrase Mark Twain's famous quote, "Reports of the death of the book have been greatly exaggerated." Publishing in the field of Latin American Studies continues to be a vibrant enterprise, but there is no question that the trends that have constricted academic publishing in general are influencing publishing on Latin American subjects as well.

One of the bigger blows to academic book publishing has been the consolidation of the journals business, which has allowed the major journals publishers to raise subscription prices well above the rate of inflation. This has left libraries with no choice but to devote larger proportions of their budgets to maintain their ongoing journal subscriptions. So, given that most library budgets are not keeping pace with inflation, the overall pie is smaller, and more of that smaller pie is going to pay for journals as well as a growing array of electronic materials. Thus, the traditional financial supporter of the monograph, the academic library, is no longer able to provide a reliable sales foundation for specialized books.

As libraries have become more selective in their book acquisitions, the first victim to be sacrificed has been the edited volume. Whether based on a conference proceeding or carefully developed from a commissioned set of essays, edited collections are viewed by librarians as an easy choice to drop from their approval plans. Quality and level of presentation is often uneven, and journals are more likely to review authored rather than edited volumes. As a result, Rowman & Littlefield is accepting very few edited collections unless they are specifically designed as readers for the classroom.

*Specifically designed* is the key phrase here: many authors and editors genuinely believe that their book will have course adoptions,

as well as appeal to a wide array of scholars, general readers, and policymakers. And although it's true that many academic titles will find their way into a scattering of senior seminars and graduate courses, enrollments in those classes are small and the cost of marketing to those idiosyncratic and specialized courses are large. We much prefer to consider a book that has been written and presented realistically with an easily identifiable—and reachable—audience in mind.

We acquisitions editors also often are wary of edited volumes that are heralded for their multi-disciplinary breadth. It's a noble and exciting concept in theory, but in practice such works tend to speak to no one rather than to everyone. It's a phenomenon not dissimilar to the mass email requesting action. If a recipient sees that others are receiving the same request, he or she not unnaturally assumes that someone else will respond.

Specialized authored books too are endangered. True, librarians are more likely to buy monographs than edited volumes, but they do so now as part of a larger consortium, relying on inter-library loan to obtain a book for their patrons. With the growing acceptance by libraries of electronic books through OCLC's NetLibrary, ebrary, and other vendors, e-publishing is an ever-more viable option for books whose primary purpose is to convey specialized information and analysis.

I have mixed feelings about the free electronic availability of works we hope to publish commercially. In the case of specialized books whose primary audience is looking for selected, specific information within its pages, I have found that free Internet access undermines book sales. For more general works that will be read cover to cover, electronic availability tends to make

more potential readers aware of a book's existence, enhancing "buzz" and sales.

Because of these trends, Rowman & Littlefield is focusing especially on the undergraduate textbook market. Challenges face us here as well, however. Students are less and less inclined to buy the books their professors require, let alone those on the recommended reading list. If they do, they will seek out a used copy from the increasingly aggressive used-book market over a new one or share with a friend. But the psychic (and sometimes practical) rewards are great of publishing a book that helps the next generation become informed citizens—whether by teaching critical thinking, helping students view an issue with informed eyes, or opening a window to a previously unknown world.

I will end with a modest plea to all the professors reading this essay. I hope you will think of the ongoing health of your favorite publisher or of your favorite colleague's royalty check before you sell an exam or review copy through a used-book site or to your campus bookstore. Consider making the tests in your courses open book as long as the student has his or her own copy of the required text. This may sound like a self-interested scheme to sell books, but it's intended more as an incentive for your students to read and refer to the works you discuss in class—an essential part of the learning process, as all of us who love books well know! ■