ON THE PROFESSION

The Balancing Act of Publishing in Latin American Studies: Let's Start at the Beginning

by AMY GORELICK | Senior Acquisitions Editor, University Press of Florida | ag@upf.com

On one hand, the needs of the press; on the other, the author's desires. Editors and publishers have danced this delicate waltz for a long time. Today, academic publishing has its own version of the balancing act: to recoup publishing costs. Years ago, the need for balance was not quite so pronounced. University presses had the luxury of being able to publish important works for their own sake, and could trust that research libraries and individuals would buy scholarly books in large numbers. However, in this time of tightening budgets for both presses and buyers, presses want to publish quality books that will also sell a sufficient number of copies. Authors want to write books that make a scholarly impact but are typically less concerned about the financial pressures on today's publishing enterprise. I contend that instead of thinking about this relationship as one of differing goals, we must collaborate on producing more books that succeed on both a financial and academic level. Herein, I offer some ideas on how scholars in Latin American studies can help publishers in the discipline balance these larger goals from the outset.

Since this essay is about the beginning, let us start with the conception of the book project. I think that some of the most worthwhile publications are ones where the very foundations of the work are open for discussion. While some books result from an editor pitching an idea to an author, many more books (especially those by younger scholars) originate from the author's own proposal. Editors are supposed to help develop the strengths of a manuscript as part of their jobs, but they only do so when they feel strongly about eventually publishing the book. Therefore, a writer should take these directions from his or her editor seriously.

To give an example, I have been working with a senior scholar on the history of a Latin American city. The book as originally written had an identity crisis: the author wanted to write what amounted to a memoir about his family and its relation to the city; I wanted a more conventional history. After the author spent some additional time revising the manuscript, he finally struck the right narrative balance by using his family stories to illuminate the larger history of the city. The peer reviewers praised the author for his elegant writing and the style of the narrative. The author and I both navigated this balancing act successfully, since his book was improved without losing its personal flair, but it will also be accessible to a wider audience and thus sell more copies.

The potential format of the text is also related to the conception of the book. Authors commonly ask how they should present a topic; most often, they ask if it should be addressed in a single-authored book or an edited volume. I think many editors would agree with me that an edited volume is not the ideal book form. Authors who have published edited volumes will readily tell aspiring editors-to-be that there it takes far more effort to keep a dozen authors on schedule than to write the book themselves. Press editors know that edited works can be tricky to peer review and can be complicated to copyedit.

However, some topics are inspired choices for an edited volume. In Latin American studies, there seems to be a trend toward a broad regional or even hemispheric approach to certain topics, and thus a variety of specific country expertise or the diverse training of several scholars can shed light on key issues. For instance, our forthcoming book *Rural Social Movements in Latin America* gathers scholars and activists together to discuss a very hot topic. One author could not have written this book alone; thus, it is a good concept for an edited volume. It is always a good idea to sound out an editor on an edited volume before developing a full proposal, because once again, the editor can help balance the press's needs and the author's wishes.

The final starting point is the writing itself. This goes straight to the heart of the book's potential in the marketplace. It is here that the most vital balancing act occurs: an author's sometimes ambitious expectations for the work versus the reality of the market. Simply put, technical books about narrow topics are often of greater importance to other scholars but are not likely to reach a broader audience, including undergraduate course adoption, while easy-to-read books about big issues have better prospects (and thus more obvious paperback) potential. The rules for writing an accessible book are the same for Latin American studies as they are for any academic discipline: the manuscript should be an engaging narrative, not a series of discrete observations or articles; it should tell stories, not just relate information; and its prose should have more flourish than a typical academic book. If you wish to write the sort of book that will be assigned by your colleagues, an editor can give you the necessary advice, but it is incorrect to assume that all scholarly books have course potential.

This last point begs a further clarification about whether to publish the work in paperback, hard cover, e-book, or all of the above simultaneously. At our press, we initially print all scholarly books in hard cover, though this practice is not a universal one for presses that publish in Latin American studies. The largest market for monographs is research libraries, and they typically prefer archival quality publications and will pay the additional costs for hardbacks as long as they are not exorbitant. That is not to say if a paperback is available, that libraries will not buy the less expensive format and rebind it as a hardcover, which loses the press valuable sales revenue.

Responses to Questions on Academic Publishing

by Theresa May | Editor-in-Chief, University of Texas Press | tmay@utpress.utexas.edu

Electronic publications are not a major factor in the sales equation for most scholarly books at this time, because buyers do not yet purchase them in large enough numbers, so their sales numbers do not significantly contribute to the overall revenue stream for the book (this may well change in the next decade or so). Cost recovery has become a most critical metric in determining an academic list's viability. In fact, some presses have moved out of publishing in Latin American studies entirely precisely because they felt they had to publish in paperback even when it was not fiscally responsible for them to do so. If an academic book is written in such a way that it has a paperback audience, it will be released in paperback eventually, and maybe even made available as an e-book if that is cost effective. The optimal choice for the initial printing remains hardback.

To conclude, scholarly publishing's balancing act between its intellectual mission and its financial obligations seems unlikely to abate any time soon. Because of this, authors in Latin American studies should give greater consideration to the sorts of books they are writing, and develop relationships with editors to create books that are at once important to the field and also generate enough revenue to recoup the publisher's costs in a timely fashion. ■

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

We have traditionally held to the view that, for most discipline areas, there is a limited market for edited volumes and therefore our resources were better reserved for more coherent works by an author or two. There have been some notable exceptions, however, and we have used one work in particular, *The Idea of Race in Latin America* edited by Richard Graham, as a model for how a multi-author work can succeed. In general, if the edited volume is for a very new or emerging field or if it is on a topic so broad that a single author would be unlikely to be able to cover it, we'd be more inclined to consider a collected work. Ironically, looking toward a future of increased re-purposing and re-packaging of content, we have considered that eventually edited volumes might actually become *more* attractive in the long run than monographic works, but that has not yet encouraged us to accept more collections.

How important is prospective course adoption for determining whether a manuscript is accepted for publication? How do you make decisions about cloth or paperback release of your books?

We almost always consider course adoption potential when we are doing a preliminary evaluation, but that is not a make-or-break issue for acceptance. Our basic business model for scholarly works has moved away from a list with many simultaneous cloth/paper editions toward initial publication in cloth only, followed by either a traditional offset paperback or a print-on-demand paperback within a year or less. This means that almost every book can be considered for classroom adoption, even if the classes are very small and/or aren't taught every year. Occasionally, there are still cogent reasons for doing simultaneous cloth/paper runs or paperback only, but those are the exceptions these days.

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

We rarely do this because we simply don't have either the staff or the resources to invest significantly in a manuscript that we may not get. Instead, in return for a modest period of exclusivity, we try to offer an expedited turn-around time, or we offer the author an advance contract.

What is your approach to on-line availability?

Experiments with simultaneous online and print publication at other university presses suggest that, in certain case, an online edition may actually stimulate sales of the print edition, but we have very little first-hand experience with online publishing.

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

The open access movement is one of the most significant new developments everyone is watching for the moment, and, of course, emerging technology is a constant blip on all our radar screens. Another interesting dynamic is the repositioning of academic libraries as publishers or publishing partners. ■