

# Monographs and open access

*Based on a paper presented at the UKSG One-Day Conference: London, November 2015*

This article presents the project that I led for HEFCE on the implications of OA (open access) for monographs and other long-form research publications. The likely requirement that books should be OA if submitted to the REF (Research Excellence Framework) after next means that OA development must be based on an understanding of the importance of the monograph in the AHSS (arts, humanities and social sciences) as well as the challenges involved in making the transition to online OA. The project focused on three issues and each is summarized in turn in the article: What is the place of the monograph and other long-form publications in AHSS disciplines that makes it so important? What is happening to the monograph and is there a crisis as some suggest? What are the issues involved in moving monographs into a digital and OA environment – not just the challenge of effective business models but also many other aspects of sustaining and enhancing the qualities of the monograph? These include third-party rights, technical challenges, licences and the need for international collaboration.

The UK's higher education funding councils and research councils have formal requirements for journal articles to be made available through OA (open access). Issues of contention notwithstanding – above all regarding payments for gold OA, prescribed licences and responsibility for ensuring compliance – the system is now reasonably well established. There is no equivalent for research books which are central to the practice and dissemination of research in the arts, humanities and much of social science. In the future an increasing proportion of research books will be available online, even if many of these also appear in print. In this context pressure will grow to require books to be available through OA in the same way as journal articles.

HEFCE, supported by the research councils, therefore asked me to prepare a report that would explore the key issues involved in any move to OA for research books. Thinking and practice are at a much earlier stage than they were for journals, when recommendations from the working group chaired by Dame Janet Finch led to the current OA mandates for journal articles<sup>1</sup>. This meant that I was not asked to come up with equivalent recommendations but rather to clarify the issues involved in making monographs available on an OA basis so that policy could in due course be formulated. If the REF after next were to take place in the mid-2020s, and if monographs often took six or seven years to research and write, then any OA requirement for those submitted to that REF would have to be specified by 2017 or 2018.

Although the project carried the title 'Monographs & Open Access', it covered not only monographs, that is to say books by one or very occasionally two or more authors presenting the outcome of sustained research on a single topic, but also other research-based books. These include collections of essays by different authors, scholarly editions of texts and research-based exhibition catalogues. Why did I insist on the ampersand in the title? Why was it essential to see my report as being not about OA monographs but about the monograph and open access? I needed to begin with why the monograph is important in so many disciplines and whether it has entered a crisis as some proponents of OA claim. Without understanding the character and situation of the monograph it would be impossible to identify the challenges and opportunities involved in moving it into an OA environment.



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'an increasing proportion of research books will be available online'

15 There were, therefore, three core dimensions to the work. The first was to examine the place and culture of the monograph that made it so important in the AHSS (arts, humanities and social sciences). The second was to ask whether we were experiencing a crisis of the monograph. Only then could we address the third dimension and examine how innovation in publishing and access models might affect research books. The monograph itself occupied centre stage for the work, especially its first dimension, but many of the conclusions apply to all book-length research publications. The report was published in January 2015 and readers can find there an explanation of how the work was carried out as well as detailed references to support the data and the conclusions set out briefly in this article<sup>2</sup>.

## What is the place of the monograph in AHSS disciplines that makes it so important?

The monograph has a central place in the culture and ecology of research publication in the arts and humanities, and is important in most of the social sciences. These disciplines – containing as they do about half of the UK's research-active academics – should therefore not be seen as some awkward outlier destined to converge over time on the science model of publication by journal article and refereed conference proceedings. Notwithstanding some variation across disciplines, submissions to REF 2014 showed the importance of authored books in all of the arts and humanities, particularly strong in English, history and classics, and less so in philosophy and the creative and performing arts. The place of books in social science submissions was important but at a lower level, particularly strong in politics, sociology and anthropology.

'The monograph has a central place in the culture and ecology of research publication'

Why is it so important to write and read monographs? The key reason for their place in the culture of research and its communication is that they offer the length and pace needed to allow full examination of a topic, to present complex and rich ideas and a developed argument, all supported by contextualized analysis and evidence, and woven together in a reflective narrative that is not possible in a journal article. Journal publication is important but largely complements rather than displaces books as they have come to do in the sciences. The character of internal debate within a field also requires that theoretical and methodological approaches are laid out at length as the context for the analysis. Monographs are thus central to how knowledge is developed, articulated and disseminated. The first of these, the development of new knowledge, is an important aspect of the monograph's role which is not simply the communication of research findings but also their shaping and articulation. The notion of thinking through writing the book captures this well, seeing writing a monograph as a process for structuring ideas and argument and relating them to evidence.

This explains why the monograph is so important to the culture of these disciplines. There is the culture of attachment, how scholars identify with the books they write. It is the medium through which they develop a personal and distinctive voice, and the book becomes a physical embodiment of research and understanding. No wonder scholars care so much about their books, and no wonder they have come to occupy such an important place in career progression and reputation. My work for the report established the continuing importance of monographs for appointment and promotion but discussions with researchers and those who chaired appointment and promotion committees, together with data from one research-intensive university, revealed a much greater flexibility in the UK than one finds in the US where the monograph is inexorably tied to tenure. This flexibility produces variation between and within disciplines as well as across institutions. A monograph appears to be important for promotion in most humanities and many social science disciplines but by no means obligatory. I was nonetheless struck by the way the early career researchers whom I consulted saw the importance of writing monographs not just for their careers but also for their identity and voice as a researcher. It is therefore encouraging that books held up in submissions to REF 2014 and, if informal reports are correct, they continued to score very strongly.

'early career researchers ... saw the importance of writing monographs ... for their identity and voice as a researcher'

- 16 My report called upon the funding councils to publish the grade distribution for each type of output at an appropriate level of aggregation to help REF managers in universities offer more informed advice about publication strategies.

## What is happening to the monograph and is there a crisis as some suggest?

The importance of the monograph may explain the discourse about its being in crisis that can be traced back for at least 30 years. Many see OA as a solution to what they present as a more recent crisis, and I sought to probe the notion of a crisis from various directions, some more susceptible to evidence-based analysis than others. If what I am about to say throws doubt on the notion of a recent crisis in the UK (I cannot speak for other countries) this does not mean that all is rosy, simply that such problems as exist may be structural and long-standing.

Has there been a decline in the number of monographs published? I obtained data from the four largest UK publishers of monographs (two university presses and two commercial publishers) and their total publication of new authored research books doubled from 2,523 new titles in 2004 to 5,023 new titles in 2013. Growth is evident across almost all disciplines though rates of growth varied. Is it harder to get published in some sub-areas than others? Almost certainly so, but it is hard to know whether this has become harder over recent decades, and far more research is now being produced as the major expansion of student numbers has led to a growth in academics on teaching and research contracts. Some point to a decline in print runs as a sign of crisis, but the flourishing of remainder bookshops in the 1970s and 1980s and today's print-on-demand systems together remind us that the size of a print run may not tell us very much. Perhaps there has been a decline in the numbers purchased? Evidence is hard to obtain on changes in individuals' purchasing habits and, even if anecdotally the cost of many monographs has led to fewer sales to individuals, the OAPEN-UK survey of academics in which we collaborated revealed that academics continue to buy them. We do not have the data to confirm the extent of the decline in individual or library purchasing patterns. It is clear that academic libraries buy fewer monographs than in the past, partly due to the pressure that the rising cost of science journals has put on library budgets, but it is also because librarians are less confident about the usage of all the monographs that they have acquired.

'Growth is evident across almost all disciplines'

The picture is thus uneven but it is hard to see from the UK perspective something that might constitute a crisis that has become significantly more acute in recent years. This means that the case for OA monographs will be for positive reasons rather than to meet a crisis that threatens their survival, something that I find encouraging. There is, however, a crisis looming which is rarely noted. The monograph is an extended work that exists as an integral whole in which argument and evidence weave together in a long and structured presentation. Even if one does not always read the whole book – though I was struck by how much academics still do that – the chapters one reads are situated within that larger whole. It is now increasingly possible to purchase individual chapters online, and there may be a parallel here with the fate of the integrated music album when online purchasing of individual tracks became possible. With an inevitable future growth in the online sale of chapters, the digital and free availability of the work through OA might save the monograph as a book accessed in its entirety. The current problems facing the monograph may not themselves constitute a crisis, but OA may be needed to deal with the much more serious crisis that is looming.

'OA may be needed to deal with the much more serious crisis that is looming'

## What are the issues involved in moving monographs to a digital and OA environment?

In the context of the culture and situation of the monograph as presented in the report, what might be the implications of a move to digital access and open access? How might

17 innovation in publishing and access models affect the monograph? Those of us in AHSS disciplines need to understand and help shape the processes of change so that the powerful aspects of the monograph are protected in any OA environment while the new opportunities offered by OA strengthen it. The core challenge revolves around the materiality of the book. Its physical form has long allowed high-quality incorporation of content other than text, with images and layout not primarily cosmetic but fundamental to the presentation of the research. A monograph is not simply a linear text – one can easily flip backwards and forwards, using the index, illustrations, maps, references and bibliography, and follow up cross-references. This cannot currently be replicated in e-books or other screen reading, and academics content to read articles on a screen rarely wish to do so for books as a whole, something which interestingly varies to only a limited extent with age. The material quality of what is available through OA is much more important for books than for articles, and this applies not just to monographs but to scholarly editions of texts with their annotations and recto-verso presentation. Significant technological improvement is needed if OA is to succeed, even if, as is likely, print editions continue, because OA must rest on a rough equivalence of experience.

Print books do, however, have limitations which OA will help overcome. There is, above all, the opportunity for wider readership both in the west and in the developing world. There is, as we have just seen, the ability freely to access the whole book, reducing the danger of chapter-based fragmentation. Most exciting of all are the opportunities for enhancement, turning the book into a more dynamic text. It can be enriched online by embedding other media, allowing more sophisticated searches and text mining, the use of other analytics, the creation of course materials with hyperlinks to other sources and the potential for the book to become a more living intellectual document with comments from an engaged community. All of this, rather than a supposed crisis of the monograph, is the reason to welcome a future move towards OA for monographs.

'Most exciting of all are the opportunities for enhancement'

## The way forward

The journey to successful OA monographs will not be an easy one, and the challenges are fully set out in the report. The technical and process issues have already been raised, with technological improvements needed to capture key dimensions of the user experience of print books. Any OA model based on digital access to the text alone (as with the current green route for journal articles) might seriously undermine the success of open access and its ability to offer readers the breadth of experience. The issues of long-term storage and usability present a further technical challenge – will closed formats become obsolete and in the longer term will digital versions remain readable?

There are other difficulties that will need to be addressed. Third-party rights receive substantial attention in the report, because in many arts and humanities disciplines the core research materials are ones where others own the rights and must give permission for their reproduction. This includes the rights to an image, a text and a musical or choreographic notation, and is important for many disciplines, amongst them art history, music, dance, drama, film, literature, cultural studies and cultural history. This is already a problem with print publication where high fees and restrictive permissions create serious difficulties. Open access will exacerbate the situation, with fees already much higher for digital publication and the current granting of permission for a limited period (normally three to five years) rendered meaningless by OA.

Open licensing will have to be considered as many arts and humanities researchers fear what they see as potential misuse, above all in relation to the most liberal CC BY licence which imposes no limits on the use and reuse of material so long as the original source is acknowledged. The report concludes that OA should not be seen as all or nothing, with anything but CC BY falling short of true OA. If widespread academic support is to be won for OA, and given the cultural weight of the monograph that support is necessary, then in the medium term at least more restrictive licences should be permitted.

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The international context is important for any UK move to OA for monographs. With international research collaboration and career mobility, one driver of the quality of research, some common approach to OA is essential, yet it will be hard to achieve. There is a clear trend towards OA in most countries but speed and emphases vary greatly, especially so for monographs where progress has necessarily been much slower than for journal articles. An international convergence of approaches will be hard to achieve, less over broad principles than their implementation, not least the character and enforcement of mandates. It seems likely that most progress can be made at the European level, and policy focus there might be sensible.

Finding successful business models for OA publication of monographs is the greatest and most important challenge. There is, after all, no such thing as free open access. 'Author pays' (usually the author's funder or institution) has become the key model for gold OA journal articles, but the much higher costs of OA books and the lower funding for these disciplines make it hard to see how author pays could work were OA to be mandatory. The report, drawing on a report commissioned from London Economics and included as an annex, identifies a range of emerging business models: university presses subsidized by their institution; OA publishers driven by idealistic or disruptive objectives, though scaling them up could be challenging; freemium schemes whereby readers' payments for enhancements (maybe a print copy) pay for the whole process; an aggregator model where an organization bundles books into a package and sells them, perhaps on subscription, to libraries; and author payment. It is unlikely that one or two business models will prevail, in contrast to journals, and a variety will be needed to deliver OA monographs. Which model is in operation should be as far as possible invisible to the reader if ease of access is to be achieved. After all, which readers know the business model of each of the publishers of the books they now read? If mandates are to be introduced then the overall system must be capable of delivering them, and that means funders monitoring it as it evolves, maybe supporting pilots and scaling up ventures to help things along.

'Finding successful business models for OA publication of monographs is the greatest and most important challenge'

The report, which contains the evidence and references on which this article is based, has generally been well received for its analysis of a complex situation fundamental to disciplines in which the UK excels. It is essential that the importance of the monograph is recognized in any move to OA and that it is both protected and enriched. The current uncertainties over higher education and research organization, as well as methods of research evaluation, may delay progress on policy for OA monographs. Once these issues are settled, it is important that policy directions are clarified and it is to be hoped that the issues raised in this article and set out at length in the report will provide a constructive basis for that clarification.

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#### Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'Abbreviations and Acronyms' link at the top of the page it directs you to: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>

#### Competing interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

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- 2 Crossick G, *Monographs and open access. A report to HEFCE* (2015). The report is available at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2015/monographs/> (accessed 20 January 2016).

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To cite this article:

Crossick, G, Monographs and open access, *Insights*, 2016, 29(1), 14–19; DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1629/uksg.280>

Published by UKSG in association with Ubiquity Press on 07 March 2016