

Referees' Decisions: academic publishing

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The main focus of academic or scholarly presses – whether in the UK, the US or Australia – has generally been the publication of scholarly monographs. The principal market for this kind of book was traditionally in expensive hardback editions designed for university libraries around the world, with a secondary market in cheaper paperback editions for students. The other main activity for scholarly publishers is text book publishing, which is a highly lucrative business. However, although there are some pressures on Melbourne University Press (MUP) to move into text book publishing, this would not be a real option for us without major organisational and cultural change. We don't have the skills or the experience to move into this very specialised field, and I, for one, certainly don't want to spend my days publishing text books.

As the world of higher education struggles to reassess its purpose, the scholarly publishing sector is likewise being forced to reassess its activities. The multi-national giants like Oxford University Press or Cambridge University Press have expanded into many new areas. It's the smaller presses like MUP who are most immediately affected by the radical changes in academia. In the past few years there has been a steady decrease in sales of scholarly monographs, despite strenuous efforts on the part of many scholarly presses – including MUP – to increase the readership for such works. 'Increasing the readership' may be a euphemism for increasing sales, but without increased sales we can't survive.

There has been much discussion in certain sections of academia and among scholarly publishers and editors around the admirable notion of broadening the market for scholarly writing. The aim is to make the work of academics accessible to educated general readers – that is, to bridge the gap between academia and the wider community, and to bring some of the very exciting work being done in our universities down from the ivory tower and into the marketplace. An important element of this strategy – and one in which I'm a strong believer – has been a growing push among publishers and editors to encourage their academic authors to

change the way they write. Instead of the traditional academic style, we want to encourage people to write in a more accessible, open way using a more relaxed, direct, conversational style, and to help them find and use their own unique and personal 'voice'.

We heard Ivor Indyk talking about critical writing with 'reach' – that is, writing which reaches beyond its immediately specified audience into the public realm. He described Walter Benjamin as 'driving his skills as a critic into the public arena – the streets and markets of the modern city'. This is exactly what I'm talking about. It's this kind of writing that scholarly publishers and editors are now seeking. Writing like this doesn't mean diluting the scholarship. It doesn't mean watering down or over-simplifying the research, the analysis, the theory. It's perfectly possible, with a bit of thought and effort, to express complex ideas in plain, jargon-free language. While we're on this subject, I'd like recommend two pieces in the latest issue of *Meanjin* (No 1, 2000): Tom Griffith's article 'Essaying the Truth', and Hannah Fink's review of Drusilla Modeskja's *Stravinsky's Lunch*. Both of these pieces should be mandatory reading for all aspiring academic authors. When I'm looking at a manuscript, what I want to know most of all is that authors *care* about their subject – that they are excited about their work. I don't want dry impersonality; I want a text that is argumentative and opinionated. I want this caring, this excitement, to come through on the page and to communicate itself to the reader. I want work that is written with passion and style.

Another angle on the attempt to attract a wider audience for scholarly works has been in the packaging of these books. Until fairly recently, they were produced in rather drab, unimaginative (and cheap) covers. These days – certainly at MUP, and elsewhere as well – we go to great lengths (and considerable expense) to design sophisticated, stylish, attractive covers and jackets. If we want these books to sell, they must stand out in a crowded retail environment and appeal to contemporary general readers – and achieving this doesn't come cheap. Yet, despite these efforts, and a far greater emphasis and expenditure on marketing than was needed in the past, the average sales of our scholarly books are steadily decreasing, to a point where many of them sell only 400 or 500 copies. Should we give up on these attempts? Should we go back to cheap, standardised 2-colour covers and forget about developing and shaping the text for a broader audience?

Twenty years ago, many MUP titles would sell up to 2000 or even 2500 copies. Today we're struggling to sell even 1000 copies of most of our books. Some of the reasons for this are fairly obvious:

- library budgets keep shrinking. At the same time the cost of journals – essential purchases for libraries – has exploded, and there is a huge increase in expensive electronic products which they must also buy. This leaves an ever-smaller amount for the purchase of actual books;
- the ubiquitous use of photocopied course packs means that students rarely need to buy a real book. The massive amount of photocopying in post-secondary institutions at all levels represents a huge problem for scholarly publishers;
- academics are too busy, and too stressed-out, to do anywhere near the amount of

reading they were once able to do, so they are also buying fewer books;

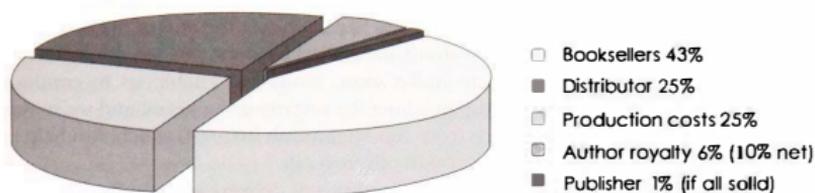
- and, while we make enormous efforts to reach a non-academic audience, the truth is that many academic monographs are simply too specialised for the ordinary reader.

Another reason it's so difficult to sell scholarly works to general readers is that very few bookshops today carry standard reference and backlist titles. Except for a few, precious, quality independent booksellers, the emphasis in the general market these days is on new 'front list' titles with large turnover. Chain stores now dominate the market, and they simply don't hold stock for longer than two or three months. In fact, many of them have computerised inventory systems which automatically return unsold books after only six weeks in store. This, along with the ever increasing number of new books published, has savagely reduced shelf-life in bookstores. And, in turn, this results in lower sales per title. As the market shrinks, the price goes up. Economies of scale mean that the cost of producing and printing 1000 copies of a 240-page paperback will be much higher per unit than the cost of printing 5000 copies of the same book. A commercial publisher producing a print run of 5000 copies of this book would be able to set the recommended retail price at around \$19.95. With a print run of 1000 copies, however, the retail price per unit would be more like \$34.95. Higher-priced books meet buyer resistance, and thus sales fall, and therefore the price goes up even further – it's a vicious cycle.

The biggest problem is, of course, Australia's small population, which means a very limited market for books. Australians are reputed to be the biggest book-buyers in the world on a per capita basis, but I've always had my doubts about that often-quoted statistic. (My doubts arise from the fact that, in a door-stop interview, the answer to the question 'Have you bought a book this week?' is likely to be answered 'Yes' by someone who in fact has bought the *New Idea*. In a large sector of Australian society, magazines are referred to as 'books'. It's easy to see, then, that statistics on book-buying habits may well be skewed by a simple terminology problem.) Even if it's true, however, that Australians are big book buyers on a per capita basis, the fact is that there are only about 18 million of us, which is a pretty small group of capita.

The history of Australian book publishing demonstrates that independent Australian publishers almost never survive for more than a few years, a decade at most, unless they have a second string to their bow. This might be a separate agency or distribution business, a campus bookshop, or some other external source of income that 'props up' their uneconomic publishing program. Inevitably, stand-alone independent local publishers – that is, those with no other source of income apart from publishing – end up either going out of business or being taken over by a big corporation. Scholarly books have an even more limited market, so we are squeezed from all sides.

Most people have only a vague idea where the money they pay for an individual scholarly book actually goes. It might be useful at this point to spell this out. Let's assume a customer in a bookshop pays \$40.00 (the recommended retail price) for a particular book.



Of that \$40.00, an average of 43% (i.e. \$17.20) is taken by the bookseller. The distributor gets 25% (i.e. \$10.00) for warehousing the book and physically getting it into the shop. Another 25% (i.e. \$10.00) covers the direct costs of editing, designing, typesetting, printing, binding, marketing and promoting the book, and – hopefully – makes a contribution towards the publisher's overheads like salaries, rent, electricity and so on. These three elements account in total for 93% of the recommended retail price of \$40.00. This leaves only 7% of the \$40.00 (i.e. \$2.80) to be shared between the two main partners in the enterprise, the author and the publisher. If the author receives a standard scholarly royalty of 10% of publisher's net receipts, which is equivalent to approximately 6% of the recommended retail price, this means that only one per cent is left for the publisher. One per cent of \$40.00 is forty cents – and the publisher will only make this one per cent if the whole print run actually sells. In this hypothetical scenario, if the book sold out its full print run of a thousand copies, the publisher would make only \$400.00, while the author would make \$2400.00. When the print run is such a small one, the publisher struggles to cover its normal overheads without actually losing money. That little slice of one per cent is the capital which enables the publisher to fund the publication of the next book, and the one after that, and so on.

A large multinational company, of course, is in a different situation to a small, independent, 'stand-alone' publisher like MUP. Their operations in local publishing represent a minute portion of their overall activities and their overall income. Most of them would not survive in Australia without the income from their import and distribution businesses. Most small scholarly presses, both in Australia and overseas, routinely have to ask their authors either to provide a grant or subsidy towards the production costs of their book, or to forgo their royalties on the initial print run – sometimes both. Most US university presses these days either pay no royalty at all, or no royalty on the first print run – and their authors take this for granted. MUP is having to make such requests more and more often. The figures I've shown you will, I hope, demonstrate why subsidies and royalty sacrifices have become increasingly necessary if many scholarly books are to be published at all.

Almost none of the books MUP publishes ever makes a profit; many of them, while they may be of great scholarly value, don't even recover MUP's investment in producing them. The result is that we incur a loss on almost every title we publish. Fortunately, we are able to spread our costs across the retail and publishing divisions

of MUP (that is, the campus bookroom as well as the publishing division). Because of this, we usually (but not always) manage to break even at the end of the year. MUP is a not-for-profit organisation. We don't have shareholders and we don't have to return a dividend. But we have to make some money to enable us to continue publishing. We've managed to struggle along for seventy-seven years, and we're very fortunate in having access to funds from the Miegunyah bequest, which also help us to survive. But we only survive by the skin of our teeth.

What we need, of course, is alternative methods of delivery – methods that might save those huge chunks of the pie chart from going to booksellers and distributors. We've looked at all sorts of possibilities: on-line publishing, on-demand printing, and so on, and we're still exploring how best to take advantage of these new technologies. But, of course, research and development activities like this cost money. Many people are surprised to hear that MUP receives no funding from the University of Melbourne. We've been described, by Vice-Chancellors and others, as 'a jewel in the crown of the University' and similar fine-sounding phrases. These accolades, however, never translate into dollars. We have to pay our own way, and we're coming under increasing pressure not only to pay our own way but to become a profit centre for the University – in other words, to become a commercially driven operation. I don't know what they want us to do – publish gardening books, perhaps? – but it would effectively mean abandoning our mission of disseminating scholarship of the highest quality. This pressure is something we at MUP continue to resist at all costs, but as you're all aware, these kinds of imperatives are now the norm in the tertiary sector. We can be commercially successful, or we can produce quality scholarship – it's very hard to see how we can do both. In an ideal world, university press publishing would be regarded by the parent university as a service, not a business. MUP is a department of the University of Melbourne, and we have a total of nearly forty staff over both divisions. If we received a fraction of the funding of a teaching department of this size, our problems would be over.

MUP's standards for selection are stringent, our approvals process is extremely (some would say excessively) careful, and all manuscripts are subject to a rigorous peer review process. Our acquisitions policy, however, must reflect not only the scholarly worth and originality of a manuscript but also its commercial viability. In other words, the book must have a market, or at least enough of a market not to drive MUP out of business altogether. This is where we come up against the notion of the publisher or commissioning editor as 'gatekeeper' or cultural commissar – someone who censors and/or 'commodifies' knowledge. Yes, commissioning editors are interventionists. They need to be interventionist. It's their responsibility to shape, develop and package the texts they acquire in such a way as to reach the widest possible readership. An experienced commissioning editor may have good reason to feel that an author's text is too dry, too impenetrable, not accessible or 'reader-friendly' enough to reach its potential readership. In that case, it is part of the editor's responsibility to advise and encourage the author to rework the text with a much clearer awareness of its audience in mind. I stress again that this does not mean the scholarship should be diluted in any way, but rather that the expression or commu-

nication of that scholarship should be improved, clarified, made more interesting. Almost any scholarly book – at least in the humanities and social sciences – can and should be written, not in a style and language that only the author's peers will understand, but for an intelligent, well-informed readership who may not be familiar with the exclusive in-group jargon of a particular discipline or theory.

We – publishers and commissioning editors, that is, and academic authors, too – live in a society and operate in an industry which, unfortunately, is dominated by commercial imperatives and existing commercial structures. Much as MUP would love to be able to publish every worthy manuscript or thesis that comes across its threshold, the truth is that it can't. Publishing important academic research at a time when the market for such books is diminishing requires long-term financial backing. Until the day comes when we receive such long-term funding, MUP – along with most other scholarly presses – will always have to have its own survival in mind. That means being extremely selective about what we choose to publish. It means selecting, developing and publishing works that, in our judgement, will reach a wide enough readership and sell at least enough copies to break even. I'm sorry if that's bad news.

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